

Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt is one of the most original and controversial thinkers of the twentieth century, and her work has attracted a great deal of criticism and comment. In this major reinterpretation Margaret Canovan makes extensive use of unpublished material to trace the themes of Arendt's mature thought back to their origins in her concern with Nazism and Stalinism, and shows that Arendt has been widely misunderstood because her writings have not been read in their proper context.

Dr Canovan sheds new and often surprising light on many of the most controversial areas of Arendt's work, including her theory of totalitarianism itself, the links between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, her theory of action, her puzzling and disturbing comments on 'the social question' and on morality in politics, and many other aspects of her work. Arendt's thought turns out to be more complex and more deeply preoccupied with totalitarianism than is generally recognised, but also, paradoxically, to have greater contemporary relevance than might be expected. Dr Canovan's reinterpretation strengthens Arendt's claim to be regarded as one of the most significant political thinkers of the twentieth century.

Hannah Arendt

A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought

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Preface

There are two senses in which the interpretation of Hannah Arendt's political thought presented here is a *re*interpretation. It is, in the first place, a reading of her work that differs in a number of important respects from other accounts. I hope to persuade students of her work both that this reading is closer to her thought, and that there are good reasons why she should have been widely misunderstood.

The second sense is more personal, for this is not my first book on Arendt. A brief introduction to her ideas, aimed at students and written while her work was still incomplete, appeared in 1974 and (being the first in the field) became fairly well known. While subsequently working in other areas I kept in mind the possibility of going into the matter in more depth, and occasionally published pieces on Arendt. But it was only when (with the aid of grants from the British Academy) I started to study her unpublished writings, preserved in the Library of Congress, that I began to realise just how much more there was to explore. Rereading Arendt's published work in the light of these other writings, I found myself obliged to revise my previous understanding of many aspects of her thought, and to suspect that what was needed was a full-scale reinterpretation. This book is an attempt to begin that process. It cannot pretend to be comprehensive, but it is focussed particularly on the areas of Arendt's thought where a revised reading seemed to me especially necessary. Other students of her work will certainly find much to criticise here, and will want to dispute many of my specific interpretations. More generally, some may be worried by the notion that there can be anything to be *discovered* about Arendt's thinking, and may want to take issue with the suggestion that the writings she chose to publish might need to be read with one eye on those she did not. Rather than argue in the abstract about hermeneutic principles, I would ask sceptics to read the account given here and see whether I can convince them that the additional sources do indeed shed light on Arendt's major works, and, in particular, that scholars cannot afford to concentrate on *The Human Condition* to the point of ignoring her earlier work, including her unpublished writings.

Fortunately, many of Arendt's manuscripts are now being prepared for publication by Jerome Kohn,¹ to whom I am particularly indebted for his help and encouragement. Others who read all or part of the book in draft include April Carter, Sandra Hinchman and Richard King. I am profoundly grateful to them for helpful comments and incisive criticisms that have saved me from many errors, although all of them will no doubt find plenty to take issue with in the final version. James Canovan bore the greatest burden, reading successive drafts and contriving to be invariably supportive. It is to him that the book is dedicated.

I am grateful to the British Academy for the grants which made it possible for me to investigate Arendt's unpublished work, and to the Library of Congress (especially the photocopying department). Mary McCarthy (now, alas, deceased) was generous with encouragement and with permission to quote from the manuscripts.

An earlier version of chapter 7 appeared in *Social Research* (volume 57 no. 1) in 1990.

¹ The first volume, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn, is published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (New York, 1994). Ursula Ludz's edition of fragmentary German drafts for Arendt's unwritten *Einführung in die Politik* is also now available: *Was ist Politik? Aus dem Nachlass herausgegeben von Ursula Ludz* (Piper: Munich, 1993).

Abbreviations

- HC* *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958)
- L of M* *The Life of the Mind* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1978) vol. I: *Thinking*; vol. II: *Willing*
- MSS* The Arendt Papers in the Library of Congress, Washington DC
- OR* *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973)
- OT1* *The Burden of Our Time* (British title of 1st edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) (London, Secker and Warburg, 1951)
- OT2* *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edition (London, Allen and Unwin, 1958)
- OT3* *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd edition (London, Allen and Unwin, 1967)
- OT4* *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, paperback edition (London, André Deutsch, 1986)

1 Introduction

1. Hannah Arendt is one of the great outsiders of twentieth-century political thought, at once strikingly original and disturbingly unorthodox. Ever since the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951 her writings have attracted great interest and intense controversy, and during her lifetime her reputation was affected by sharp swings in intellectual fashion. *Totalitarianism* itself was first acclaimed as a profound analysis of Nazism and Stalinism and then dismissed as a piece of Cold War propaganda; *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution* were received in some circles as classic defences of the 'participatory' politics that became fashionable in the sixties, but deplored in others as baseless attacks on the social concerns of modern politics. Most hotly debated of all was *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, published in 1963, which was regarded by many as an act of disloyalty to the Jewish community. After her death in 1975 these particular controversies died down, but her standing as a political theorist remained debatable. Her defenders regarded her as the theorist who had done most to reassert the value of politics in an age when it had largely become subordinate to social and economic concerns. Her critics pointed to her rejection of ordinary democratic politics in favour of models drawn from ancient city-states or modern revolutions, and felt that she had little to say about politics here and now.

In recent years, however, Arendt's reputation has been growing again, as some of her ideas seem not only to have survived the passage of time but to have taken on a new relevance. One example is her thirty-year-old account of the way in which totalitarian movements construct a fictitious ideological world, which foreshadowed the analysis of communist regimes by dissident intellectuals in the years before the East European revolutions.¹ Another is to be found in those revolutions themselves, which seemed to offer some confirmation of her claim that power is less a matter of

¹ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd edition (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1967) 341–64. (This edition is referred to below as OT3.) Cf. V. Havel, 'The Power of the Powerless' in Havel et al. (ed. J. Keane), *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (London, Hutchinson, 1985) 23–39.

weapons and resources than of people acting in concert. Again, her revival of classical republican themes, which seemed so eccentric in the academic world of the 1950s, anticipated the recent interest in civic humanism.² Above all, since Anglo-American thought began at last to feel the influence of Heidegger and Nietzsche and their descendants, many aspects of Arendt's work, from her anti-foundationalism to her literary manner, have ceased to be stumbling-blocks. Interest in her work is now widespread, and seems likely to continue to grow. There is one oddity about her current standing, however, which is that in spite of the attention her writings have attracted, they have been little understood. The critical literature contains an unusually high proportion of attacks on positions that, arguably, she did not in fact hold.

It is to this situation that the present book is addressed. Its aim (apparently modest but actually quite far-reaching) is to discover and explain what Arendt's political thought is about. I hope to persuade the reader not only that she has been much misunderstood, but also that her thought is even more original and stimulating than is usually appreciated. I shall argue that the central point of her theory of totalitarianism has largely been missed; that her theory of action, like the rest of her political thought, is rooted in her response to totalitarianism and is not an exercise in nostalgia for the Greek polis; that she has important and relevant things to say about morals and politics, about authority and foundationalism, and about many other topics of political thought. First of all, though, there is an obvious objection to be met: how is it that so many of us have managed *not* to understand her up to now? This conundrum is the subject of the next section.

2. Arendt did not make great efforts to communicate her ideas. As she once explained in an interview, the motive behind her work was her own desire to understand, and writing was part of the process of understanding. If this meant that others shared her insights, that was a satisfaction to her, but she suggested half-seriously that if she been blessed with a good enough memory to be able to remember all her thoughts without working them out on paper, she might never have written anything.³ Misreadings of her books left her largely unmoved. She declared on another occasion that 'each time you write something and you send it out into the world . . .

² e.g. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975).

³ G. Gaus, *Zur Person: Porträts in Frage und Antwort* (Munich, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1965) 13. In saying this, Arendt may well have been thinking of her husband, Heinrich Blücher, a thinker and talker who did *not* write. See the invaluable biography of Arendt by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1982) 135.

everybody is free to do with it what he pleases . . . You should not try to hold your hand now on whatever may happen to what you have been thinking for yourself.⁴ This unusual sense of detachment from her readers was part of her more general detachment from academic debate, that ‘majestic indifference’ to the standard academic literature on her subject on which Sheldon Wolin commented when reviewing her last book.⁵ Rather than being contributions to public discussion, her best-known writings were essentially inward-looking, part of the endless dialogue with oneself that seemed to her to constitute the life of the mind.⁶

There are a number of ways in which this inward-looking quality of her thought has given rise to misunderstanding. For one thing, although her published writings are voluminous, they are only part of the deposit laid down by her endless process of reflection and writing. The books for which she is best known rise like islands out of a partly submerged continent of thought, some of it recorded in obscure articles, some of it only in unpublished writings. As we shall see on a number of occasions in the course of this study, unless one is aware of the reflective context to which passages in the books belong one is likely to misinterpret them.

In themselves, too, Arendt’s books invite misunderstanding, for they are often condensed and allusive. Their form is symphonic rather than sequential, interweaving and developing themes rather than presenting an argument. She often tries to say more (and particularly to make more conceptual distinctions) than can be comfortably digested, and since she does not warn her readers before using ordinary terms in special senses,⁷ it is very easy to miss the significance of what she is saying, particularly when (as is often the case) she is saying something unexpected.

Indeed, the exceptional originality of her ideas is itself a constant source of misunderstanding. Originality seems to have been something she did not seek or advertise, but that she could not avoid.⁸ As far as explicit commitments go, her intention was often the phenomenological one of trying to be true to experience.⁹ She continually stressed that what set her

⁴ ‘Remarks’ to the American Society of Christian Ethics (1973) MSS Box 70 011828.

⁵ S. Wolin, ‘Stopping to Think’, *New York Review of Books* (26 October 1978) 16.

⁶ *The Life of the Mind* (referred to below as *L of M*) vol. I: *Thinking* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1978) 185.

⁷ For example, her distinctions between ‘compassion’, ‘pity’ and ‘solidarity’ have given rise to considerable misunderstanding and disapproval: see chapter 5 below.

⁸ ‘Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt’ in M.A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: the Recovery of the Public World* (New York, St Martin’s Press, 1979) 336.

⁹ e.g. ‘Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt’ 308; ‘Action and the “Pursuit of Happiness”’ in *Politische Ordnung und menschliche Existenz: Festgabe für Eric Voegelin* (Munich, Beck, 1962) 2, 7, 9–10, 12; Cf. P. Stern and J. Yarbrough, ‘Hannah Arendt’, *The American Scholar* 47 (Summer 1978) 372; B. Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 1981) 68–72; L.P. and S.K. Hinchman, ‘In Heidegger’s Shadow: Hannah Arendt’s Phenomenological Humanism’, *Review of Politics* 46 (April 1984) 183–211.

off thinking was some actual political event, while her objection to the dominant Western tradition of political philosophy was that it had distorted the actual experiences of political actors. As she herself was well aware, however, curious things could happen to events and experiences once they entered that space 'between past and future' that is the domain of thought.¹⁰ Her writings on Nazism and Stalinism, or on the French and American Revolutions, are in a sense concerned with actual political experiences, whether contemporary or historical, but only in a rather roundabout way. What her work most resembles is some medieval manuscript on the pages of which dragons and griffins climb in and out of the letters, and leaves and tendrils twine about the words: a marvellous work of art, wonderfully bejewelled, but in which the text is 'illuminated' in a way that is liable to distract attention from it.

Particularly in dealing with the past, Arendt seemed to combine two different approaches, only one of which was the phenomenological impulse to get behind abstractions to experience. In this latter mood she could find comfort for the breakdown of European civilisation that she had witnessed by seeing in the collapse of traditional thinking 'the great chance to look upon the past with eyes undistracted by any tradition' and 'to dispose of a tremendous wealth of raw experiences'.¹¹ As we shall see, it was in this spirit that she set out to recover the political experiences of 'plurality' which had, she thought, been obscured and distorted by the influence of Platonic philosophy. Along with this phenomenological humility, however, went another, apparently different, approach to the treasures of the past, which she described in one of her best essays, that on her friend, Walter Benjamin.

Benjamin had been a fanatical collector of fragments and aphorisms, whose ambition it was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations. Speaking of him as a 'poetic thinker', Arendt meditated on Shakespeare's song 'Full fathom five', and on the 'pearl diver' who fishes in the depths of the past for remains that have suffered a 'sea-change'. The diver's purpose is not to excavate the sea floor, 'but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths', guided by the belief that 'the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization'.¹² This kind of deliberately arbitrary use of fragments recovered from the past¹³ is liable to

¹⁰ 'Preface: the Gap Between Past and Future', and 'Truth and Politics', both in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Viking Press, 1968) 13, 227.

¹¹ 'Tradition and the Modern Age' in *Between Past and Future* 28; *L of M I* 12.

¹² 'Walter Benjamin 1892–1940' in *Men in Dark Times* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970) 205–6. On Arendt's debt to Benjamin, and on the tensions in her view of the past, see S. Benhabib, 'Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative', *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990) 188–96.

¹³ For evidence that the arbitrariness was indeed deliberate, see 'Action and the "Pursuit of Happiness"' 2–3; *L of M I* 212.

conflict with the phenomenological ambition to recover raw experience, causing further confusion for Arendt's readers. The metaphor of 'crystallization' perhaps describes her own way of holding the two approaches together; for while it may be possible to see through a crystal to the ground in which it is embedded, it is in the nature of the same crystal to have many facets, reflecting light from different sources and glittering with inexhaustible significance.¹⁴ The multiple meanings that she found in her chosen sources are further complexities that make her thought hard to understand, and even harder to summarise.

As if these sources of confusion were not enough, there is another that lies in a tension at the heart of her enterprise, in what one might perhaps call her unsystematic system-building. Arendt did not want to build a system of political philosophy. On the infrequent occasions when she made statements about her approach to her work she emphasised its tentativeness and flexibility.¹⁵ Authentic political thought necessarily arose, she believed, out of real political events, and had to be rethought in response to them.¹⁶ In any case, thinking itself (as she argued in *The Life of the Mind*) was like Penelope's weaving, constantly undoing its own construction.¹⁷

This anti-systematic view of thinking, to which she was deeply committed, was something that she inherited from the thinkers who made most impression on her in her youth. Her first intellectual hero, Kierkegaard,¹⁸ had set out on his philosophical adventures by attacking orthodox Hegelianism and opposing to that abstract, systematic, 'objective' thinking his own 'subjective thinking' which 'puts everything in process'.¹⁹ This message was reinforced by Nietzsche, and by Arendt's teachers, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. One of Jaspers' earliest insights as he moved into philosophy from the medical science in which he had been trained was that 'there is such a thing as meaningful thinking without results'.²⁰ His own philosophy does not present a system, and

¹⁴ For a vivid account of Arendt's use of quotations and arbitrary interpretations of past writers when teaching, see Stern and Yarbrough, 'Hannah Arendt' 373, 376. For much less forgiving comments on her use of historical sources, see J.N. Shklar, 'Hannah Arendt as Pariah', *Partisan Review* 50/1 (1983) 67, 69.

¹⁵ 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 338.

¹⁶ 'Action and the "Pursuit of Happiness"' 2; 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution', *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edition (London, Allen, and Unwin, 1958) 482.

¹⁷ *L of M* I 88.

¹⁸ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 45.

¹⁹ S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. W. Lowrie (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1944) 68.

²⁰ K. Jaspers, 'Philosophical Autobiography' in P. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (New York, Tudor, 1957) 31. On Arendt's debt to Jaspers, see L.P. and S.K. Hinchman, 'Existentialism Politicized: Arendt's Debt to Jaspers', *Review of Politics* 533 (1991) 435-68.

speaks of 'building by tearing down what we have built'.²¹ Similarly, although Arendt's debt to her other teacher, Heidegger, is a complex matter to which we shall return in due course, what she later remembered learning from him was not so much a doctrine as the activity of thinking itself, 'unceasingly active', continually opening up in the forest of experience paths that lead to no resting-place.²²

When she sets off, then, to think 'without a banister' to hold on to,²³ reflecting freely upon events, and writing in a way that records trains of thought instead of presenting a theory, her readers are naturally led to expect that her thoughts will not be particularly consistent, and will certainly not in any way resemble a system. The fact is, however, that Arendt had a naturally systematic mind that tended of its own accord toward consistency and synthesis. For all her inclination to see thinking in terms of Penelope's self-destructive weaving, the trains of thought she herself spun linked themselves together as if of their own accord into an elaborate and orderly spider's web of concepts, held together by threads that were none the weaker for being hard to see. As with Hegel, this means that one cannot understand one part of her thought unless one is aware of its connections with all the rest.

If there is in some sense a systematic network of thought concealed under the informal surface of Arendt's writings, how is this best approached? Should a would-be interpreter do for her the job she did not do for herself, and build the system that is implicit in her work?²⁴ The main objection to this approach is in line with her own explicit objections to system-building, namely that it would freeze into a static construction what is actually a dynamic and unfinished process, and pretend that issues were settled when they were not.²⁵ Her thinking about politics took the form of a set of complex and interrelated trains of thought, in the course of which she did indeed establish a great many settled positions, firm conceptual distinctions and interconnected commitments, but which remained open-ended and incomplete. As two of her former graduate students commented when describing her teaching, she 'succeeded in . . . saying something definite – taking a stand, so to speak – and yet preserving an atmosphere of openness'.²⁶

²¹ K. Jaspers, *Philosophy*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969) vol. I 34; Cf. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 74.

²² 'Martin Heidegger at 80' in M. Murray (ed.), *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978) 296–8. On Arendt's debt to Heidegger, see Hinchman and Hinchman, 'In Heidegger's Shadow'.

²³ 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 336. Cf. Kierkegaard, 'out upon the deep with 70,000 fathoms of water under him', *Stages on Life's Way* (London, Oxford University Press, 1940) 402. ²⁴ e.g. Parekh, *Hannah Arendt* xii.

²⁵ *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958) 170–1. (This edition is referred to below as *HC*.) See chapter 7 below.

²⁶ Stern and Yarbrough, 'Hannah Arendt' 375.

Instead of trying to construct a static system for her, therefore, what we need to do is to follow her thought trains, to situate her best-known works within them and to show how they were related to one another. Such an approach will have the additional advantage of allowing us to follow her reflections as they developed, and in many cases to trace them to their origins. As we shall see, most of them have their roots in her experience of the overwhelming political catastrophes that she summed up under the heading of 'totalitarianism'.

This is important, because the most common reason why Arendt is misunderstood is that readers tend to start in the wrong place when trying to interpret her thought. It is not at all surprising that commentators such as George Kateb and Bhikhu Parekh should start from *The Human Condition* rather than from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, for the former appears to have a more definite structure than her other books, it is evidently concerned with fundamentals, and it seems on the face of it to represent a new beginning in Arendt's political thinking after her earlier work on Nazism and Stalinism. Given that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is no longer admired by many political scientists, there seems no reason to study it before setting out to understand what is generally regarded as Arendt's real contribution to political thought. Unfortunately, this approach is (as I hope to show) seriously misleading. Not only is *The Human Condition* itself much more closely related to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* than it appears to be, but virtually the entire agenda of Arendt's political thought was set by her reflections on the political catastrophes of the mid-century. Although this is something that has been recognised by a number of commentators,²⁷ its implications have not been worked out, and they are in fact far-reaching. Many of the things she had to say, including some of her most controversial statements, look quite different when they are put into their proper context within her reflections. Many of her positions become more intelligible – though not necessarily more persuasive. As we shall see, her political thought becomes in some ways more relevant to current concerns, and in some ways less so.

It will be claimed in this study, then, that responses to the most dramatic events of her time lie at the very centre of Arendt's thought. In a sense, her political thinking is very closely bound to political events: but only in a sense, because, as we have seen, her thought is also insistently inward-looking. Tensions between the solitary life of the mind and the public world of politics continually complicate her work, adding to the potentialities for misunderstanding. For although the impact of Nazism led her to react

²⁷ e.g. R. Beiner, 'Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: the Uncommenced Dialogue', *Political Theory* 18/2 (May 1990) 251; B. Crick, 'On Rereading *The Origins of Totalitarianism*' in Hill, *Hannah Arendt* 43; C. Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Polity, 1988) 48.

against all forms of unworldliness in favour of commitment to political responsibility, the political thought to which this eventually led her consisted of reflections of a peculiarly private kind. The call to respond to what was happening in the real world was constantly at odds with the withdrawal from the world involved in thinking, giving rise to a curious blend of speculative interpretation and sober common sense. It was in her last, unfinished work that Arendt meditated most explicitly on the tensions between politics and the life of the mind, but she was aware of these tensions for most of her adult life. A brief look at her own path towards political action and thought will help us to understand the problems involved.

3. As a young adult, Arendt was (as she later acknowledged) quite uninterested in politics²⁸ and immersed in intellectual interests of a peculiarly unworldly kind. In the light of her subsequent political commitments it is piquant that her doctoral thesis, on 'The Concept of Love in Saint Augustine', should have been concerned with a form of Christianity for which rejection of *this* world and its concerns was an essential prerequisite for the love of God.

Arendt went on thinking about Augustine for the rest of her life, and in the aftermath of totalitarianism she felt a particular kinship with one who had lived, as he did, in the dark times of the collapsing Roman Empire.²⁹ Her response to her own 'dark times', however, came to involve a thoroughgoing rejection of anything resembling his approach. Although she drew on Augustine³⁰ in constructing her concept of the 'world', it became in her thought something to be cherished rather than rejected, something, moreover, to which pure Christian goodness might even pose a threat.³¹ A quotation from Augustine, 'that a beginning be made man was created',³² later became for her a reminder of the possibility of human action in apparently hopeless circumstances, but it is significant that this was something she had to add to her original dissertation when, for a time, she later thought of revising it for publication in English.³³

What forced her out of her life as an unpolitical intellectual studying

²⁸ P. Gay, *Weimar Culture: the Outsider as Insider* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1968) 70.

²⁹ 'Understanding and Politics', *Partisan Review* 20/4 (July–August 1953) 390.

³⁰ as well as Heidegger: see chapter 4 below.

³¹ See chapter 5 below. ³² OT3 479.

³³ 'Love and Saint Augustine: an Essay in Philosophical Interpretation', translated by E.B. Ashton, MSS Box 66. This manuscript includes the beginning of a revised version on which Arendt worked in the 1960s, but which she did not complete. In the present connection, compare 033190 with 033293. Young-Bruehl (*Hannah Arendt*) 490–500, gives a synopsis of the dissertation. There is a summary with discussion in P. Boyle SJ, 'Elusive Neighborliness: Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of Saint Augustine' in J.W. Bernauer SJ (ed.), *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Boston/ Dordrecht/ Lancaster, Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) 81–113.

antipolitical theology was of course the threat posed by Nazism, which was by the late 1920s making it increasingly difficult for German Jews to ignore politics. Prior to that time, Arendt had been no more interested in Jewishness than in politics itself. She had few connections with Jewish religious or cultural traditions, and found the 'Jewish question' (as she later confessed) 'boring'.³⁴ As Nazism gained strength, however, she moved increasingly in Zionist circles, acting according to the principle that, "When one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself *as a Jew*." Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man.³⁵

By 1930 it had become clear to her that regardless of her distance from Jewish religion, culture and language, she was in the eyes of the world not an intellectual of German culture but simply a Jew. She worked out her response to this situation by way of a study of an earlier Jewish German who had found herself in a rather similar situation, Rahel Varnhagen, one of the early-nineteenth-century German Romantics. Although Arendt later denied that there was anything autobiographical about this study,³⁶ she evidently felt close to Rahel,³⁷ and the very harshness of the judgements she passed on her predecessor suggests a lack of distance. Arendt criticised Rahel for having spent so much of her life trying to escape from Jewishness into assimilation before finally accepting both her birth and the position as 'pariah' that went along with it.³⁸ Her mistake, in Arendt's view, was that, like so many other Jews, she did not think in political terms and see the denial of rights involved in her position. Instead, she regarded Jewishness simply as a personal misfortune, like a limp or a stutter.

Rahel Varnhagen contains a critique not only of attempts at assimilation and the political naiveté that prompted them, but also of the unworldly introspection that had allowed Rahel and other prominent figures in German culture to be so unpolitical. The Romantic cult of feeling and the fascination with an inner world of ideas and experiences blinded their devotees to reality,³⁹ and as Arendt worked her own way to political consciousness she laid great stress on the need to get outside oneself into the world shared with others, to become aware of and to respond to political reality.

³⁴ Arendt to Jaspers, 7 September 1952, *Hannah Arendt/ Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, ed. L. Köhler and H. Saner (Munich, Piper, 1985) 234; Cf. Shklar, 'Hannah Arendt as Pariah' 64–77.

³⁵ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 109; Gaus, *Zur Person* 20.

³⁶ Gaus, *Zur Person* 21. ³⁷ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 56.

³⁸ *Rahel Varnhagen: the Life of a Jewish Woman*, trans. R. and C. Winston (San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) 227. For an illuminating discussion of Arendt's treatment of Rahel, see D. Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 30–71.

³⁹ *Rahel Varnhagen* 9–12, 21.

The practical dangers of a gap between inner experience and reality became cruelly obvious in 1933, when many German intellectuals demonstrated their political irresponsibility by giving Hitler their support. In disgust, Arendt abandoned her academic milieu for practical activity within the Zionist movement,⁴⁰ first in Germany, then, after a brief spell in German police custody, as a refugee in France. There she met her future husband, Heinrich Blücher, a revolutionary socialist from whom (as she later told Karl Jaspers) she learned to think politically.⁴¹ There she also found inspiration in the writings of an earlier Jewish radical, Bernard Lazare, the 'conscious pariah' who had drawn from experience of the Dreyfus Affair the lesson that the situation of the Jews was a political one to which the answer must be equally political: a radical alliance with all the oppressed people of Europe to fight for freedom.⁴² Arendt's new activism had a distinctly radical tinge which included a pronounced hostility to the bourgeoisie, including the Jewish bourgeoisie. As late as 1944, she was prepared to argue in print that instead of seeking the favour of the Great Powers, Zionist leaders should have adopted Lazare's radical proposal 'to organize the Jewish people in order to negotiate on the basis of a great revolutionary movement', which 'would have meant an alliance with all progressive forces in Europe'.⁴³

In 1941, after internment in a French camp, she was able to escape to the United States, where her continuing commitment to the Jewish cause took two forms. One was the study of antisemitism which gradually turned into a book on the antecedents of Nazism and then into *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The other was direct intervention in Jewish politics within America, particularly through columns in the German Jewish paper, *Aufbau*, for which she wrote from 1941 to 1945. She vehemently supported the campaign for a Jewish army to fight against Nazism alongside the Allies, and thereby to claim for the Jews the dignity of actors rather than accepting the passive role of victims. She was also highly critical of most of the various factions of Zionism, and particularly of schemes for a Jewish

⁴⁰ Gaus, *Zur Person* 19–20; Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 102–8, 138–9.

⁴¹ Arendt to Jaspers, 29 January 1946, *Briefwechsel* 67. Blücher had been involved while very young in the abortive Spartacist rising in Germany in 1918–19, headed by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and later with the Communist Party. See Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 124–8.

⁴² 'The Jew as Pariah: a Hidden Tradition' (April 1944), in the invaluable collection of Arendt's 'Jewish' writings edited by Ron H. Feldman, *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (New York, Grove Press, 1978) 76. See also Feldman's 'Introduction' 31. Arendt later edited a collection of Lazare's writings, *Job's Dungheap* (New York, Schocken Books, 1948).

⁴³ 'Zionism Reconsidered' (1944) in *The Jew as Pariah* 152–3.

state in Palestine that took no account of the need for an accommodation with the Arabs who were already living there.⁴⁴

The overwhelming message of her political writings during these years was a call for human beings in general and Jews in particular to take responsibility for the political world in which they found themselves: to take action rather than letting things happen to them, and to recognise and face up to political realities. The historic situation of Jews as a people without a state, living as pariahs among other nations, had, she thought, made them particularly liable to treat events as if they came from the hand of fate, and particularly devoid of political realism.⁴⁵ In opposition to this kind of dreamy determinism she offered a humanist summons to responsibility.

As we shall see later, however, Arendt's version of humanism was more than a contrast between action and determinism. The special danger of modernity, as she saw it, was that those who felt the impulse to act tended to look for some kind of irresistible trend to side with, some natural or historical force with which they could throw in their lot. She would later diagnose this as the fundamental sin of totalitarianism, but it was a danger that she saw on all sides.⁴⁶ If man makes himself the 'tool of natural laws', and evades his human responsibility 'of creating laws himself and even prescribing them to nature', he turns himself into an agent of the 'natural law of ruin' that threatens everything human beings have made.⁴⁷

The political message with which Arendt emerged from these formative experiences, therefore, was a humanist message of political commitment: commitment to take responsibility for what was happening in the world instead of surrendering in the face of supposedly inevitable trends, and commitment to face up to reality instead of escaping into private or collective fantasies. Now, this stress on realism and responsibility may on the face of it appear to rule out what we have earlier described as the 'inward-looking', private character of Arendt's political thought. If, as is certainly the case, her political thought grew directly out of her political experiences and commitments, and if, moreover, her endeavours to understand and think about politics were geared to 'the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality' (as she put it in the Preface to

⁴⁴ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 170–9; *The Jew as Pariah* 33–9. There is a detailed discussion of Arendt's writings on Zionist topics in Barnouw, *Visible Spaces* 72–134.

⁴⁵ There is a particularly helpful discussion of this topic in Feldman's 'Introduction' to *The Jew as Pariah* 20–47.

⁴⁶ see e.g. 'The Jewish State: Fifty Years After' (May 1946), in *The Jew as Pariah* 166–74; 'Imperialism: Road to Suicide', *Commentary* 1 (February 1946) 32–3.

⁴⁷ 'Franz Kafka: a Revaluation', *Partisan Review* 11/4 (Fall 1944) 416–17.

the first edition of *Totalitarianism*),⁴⁸ how could her thought be at the same time so private and esoteric? We can perhaps understand this by having recourse again to the metaphor of the spider's web. Spinning her web, the spider is of necessity realistic, anchoring her threads to the world as it is given. But in spite of the random conformations of twigs and stones which determine the outer boundaries of her web, its form is of her own design, and the closer to the centre one looks, the less it reflects its surroundings.⁴⁹ As we investigate Arendt's work, we shall find in its intricate thought trains a continual tension between her profound commitment to political realism and the withdrawal from the world into the centre of her own web that (as she was so well aware) was the prerequisite for the life of the mind.

4. The chapters that follow will offer an interpretation of Arendt's political thought that will not attempt to supply her with the system that she herself did not build, but will try instead to follow the windings and trace the interconnections of her thinking. This will first of all involve disentangling the complex web of reflections she wove into *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and then showing how a cluster of thought trains grew out of this thinking about totalitarianism: reflections on Marxism and modern society; reflections on the deficiencies of the Western tradition of political philosophy; reflections on the human condition itself; reflections on morals and politics; reflections on the ways in which political concepts need to be rethought to take account of human plurality; reflections, finally and (as we shall see) inconclusively, about whether politics and philosophy can ever be reconciled. Each of these sets of reflections is rich in complexities and ramifications. Ignoring these complexities for the moment, however, the rest of this section will attempt to indicate some of the main points we shall be exploring.

A detailed account of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is essential, partly because of its importance in setting the agenda for Arendt's later thought, but also because the book itself has been little understood. Her theory of totalitarianism is more complex than is usually appreciated and also more idiosyncratic. As we shall see, what made Nazism and Stalinism 'totalitarian' in her sense was not the scale of their cruelties but something quite different, namely a uniquely modern combination of determinism and hubris. Totalitarians simultaneously committed two errors that might on the face of it seem to be incompatible: on the one hand they were determinists, surrendering human freedom to the march of forces they

⁴⁸ *The Burden of Our Time* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1951) viii. This edition is referred to below as *OTI*.

⁴⁹ Cf T. Weiss, 'The Web – For Hannah Arendt' in *The Medium: Poems by Theodore Weiss* (New York, Macmillan, 1965) 40–1, and Arendt to Jaspers, 23 October 1965, *Briefwechsel* 650.

believed to be irresistible; on the other hand they were, in their restless activism, convinced that 'everything is possible'.⁵⁰ The point (as Arendt sees it) is that modern men are tempted to purchase unlimited power at the cost of siding with inhuman forces and giving necessity a helping hand. To do this, however, is to betray all that is most characteristic of humanity. Human freedom and civilisation are at the best of times vulnerable islands threatened by the raging tides of nature, but the great danger of modernity, in her view, is that human beings are continually letting loose further torrents, setting in motion pseudo-natural forces that can sweep away civilisation. Totalitarianism is the culmination of such tendencies, the ultimate hubris of finding that 'everything is possible' by moving with and accelerating these forces and sacrificing to them stability, spontaneity, plurality – everything that is genuinely human.

This complex and ambitious claim about the significance of totalitarianism underlies not only Arendt's account of Nazism and Stalinism, but also her analysis of modern society. In order to understand *The Human Condition* we need to look at the body of thought that links it to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, namely Arendt's reflections on the totalitarian elements in Marxism. Immediately after finishing *Totalitarianism* she set out to write a book on this subject which was to have balanced the concentration on Nazism in the earlier study, and although no such book was ever published, substantial manuscript remains allow us to follow her thoughts and to see how, even though the focus of her attention shifted away from Nazism and Stalinism, the same preoccupation with the surrender of humanity to pseudo-natural forces remained.

Meanwhile, her investigation of how Marxism could have turned into a totalitarian ideology on a par with Nazism led her to find some of the remote sources of this catastrophe not just in the 'subterranean currents' of Western civilisation that had borne Hitler to power, but in the great tradition of Western political philosophy itself. In chapter 3 we shall trace these reflections about Marx and Western traditions, and about how Marxist totalitarianism could have emerged out of a lethal combination of Platonic distrust of politics and modern worship of automatic processes. As we shall see, Arendt found direct analogies between the nuclear chain-reactions let loose by modern scientists, the process of death and destruction let loose by the totalitarian rulers, and the 'liberation of the life process' embodied in modern economic development and celebrated by Marx.

If we are to understand *The Human Condition* we need to be aware of these parallels and of their influence (for example) on her concepts of

⁵⁰ OT3 440.

'labour' and of 'society'. Above all, however, we need to be aware of the persistent concern with hubris and nemesis that lies at the heart of Arendt's thinking. If totalitarianism, nuclear warfare and runaway economic growth are all, in their different ways, terrible warnings of what happens when human beings try to purchase omnipotence at the price of siding with inhuman forces, then it is a matter of some interest to human beings to have a clear understanding both of their own potentialities and of their own limits. Besides offering a critique of the misunderstandings of human activities offered by both ancient philosophers and modern social scientists, *The Human Condition* is also an attempt to clarify the human *predicament*, and in particular to map the narrow path between what the Preface to the first edition of *Totalitarianism* had called 'reckless optimism and reckless despair',⁵¹ between believing oneself to be omnipotent and feeling oneself to be powerless. Rather than reading the book simply as a celebration of action, therefore, we need to recognise the warnings of its limits and dangers.

As we shall see in chapter 4, Arendt's theory of action is in any case a great deal more complex than readers of *The Human Condition* often appreciate. Her manuscript lectures show that far from deferring simply and uncritically to an idealised version of the Greek polis, she was engaged in an enquiry of a more subtle and interesting kind. She was endeavouring to recover and articulate a variety of forgotten experiences of the capacity to make a new beginning, and considering the implications of these experiences for politics. These reflections were given added impetus in 1956 when the totally unexpected anticommunist rising in Hungary presented her with a new paradigm for political action, revolution. In *On Revolution*, moving back in history from twentieth-century Hungary to eighteenth-century America and France, she wove around the differences between the two classic revolutions an elaborate contrast between freedom and necessity, between the foundation of a free republic on the one hand and a surrender to the forces of nature on the other.

Arendt's equation of the 'social' agenda of the French Revolution with an abdication of freedom before necessity has had a hostile reception which has tended to obscure the complexities of her position, and particularly its relation to her reflections on totalitarianism. This is the case also with the thoughts on morals and politics that break the surface of *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*. These usually strike readers as both baffling and offensive, because Arendt makes what appear to be derogatory remarks about the influence in politics of pity and conscience. Their true context, however, is a complex train of thought that arose out of the

⁵¹ OTI vii.

experience of totalitarianism and occupied Arendt's attention over many years. In chapter 5 we shall endeavour to trace that train of thought, disentangling two sets of contrasted strands, firstly to do with the different moral problems posed by Nazism and Stalinism, and secondly with the different moral paradigms offered by Socrates and Jesus. At the heart of all these complex reflections we shall find a continuing meditation on human plurality and on the bulwarks against political evil that can be erected, not in the loneliness of the individual heart, but in the political space between plural men and the 'lasting institutions' they can create there.

This train of thought about the difference between morality for individuals and institutional structures for plural political beings is intrinsically connected with another set of reflections that can be summed up under the heading of 'A New Republicanism' (chapter 6). Besides the unfinished book on Marxism and totalitarianism, another of the books that Arendt projected but never actually produced was to have started from her examination in *The Human Condition* of the basic human activities and gone on to rethink the main political concepts and political institutions in the light of human plurality. The fact that 'men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world'⁵² had been systematically ignored by a tradition of political philosophy dominated by the single vision of philosophers. It seemed to Arendt, however, that since that tradition was broken it had become possible to recover the political experiences of plurality, and above all the implications of the *space* that forms between plural human beings. Seen within that space rather than in the mind of a single philosopher, a great many crucial political concepts look quite different, for example power and consent, freedom and authority, equality and citizenship.

Arendt's work on this unfinished book,⁵³ apparently the nearest that she got to a systematic statement of a new political theory, was interrupted by the writing of *On Revolution* (into which many of the points she had intended to cover found their way) and by her coverage of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Her book on Eichmann set off a deafening controversy within the Jewish community that diverted a good deal of her energy. Intellectually, however, reflection on Eichmann's 'banality', his apparent inability to become fully aware of what he was doing, focussed her mind more firmly on something that she had been thinking about for many years, namely the connection between thought and action, and more specifically between philosophy and politics. Interwoven with her writings was a long-term preoccupation with the unsavoury political tendencies of philoso-

⁵² HC 7. Arendt (who was unsympathetic to many aspects of the Women's Liberation movement) continued to use the traditional terminology, and where it would be cumbersome to speak of 'persons' or 'human beings' I shall follow her example.

⁵³ 'Introduction into Politics'. See chapter 4 below.

phers from Plato to Heidegger, and a complex, many-faceted meditation on whether it is in the nature of philosophy and politics to be on bad terms with one another. This was an issue that she never resolved, and in chapter 7 we shall follow her thinking as it turned this way and that over many years. It was one of the main themes of the Gifford Lectures, posthumously published as *The Life of the Mind*, on which she was working when she died.

In chapters 5 to 7 we shall be concerned not with specific books but with broad currents of thought that have been neglected or misunderstood because they flow through many of Arendt's writings, surfacing here and there in a way that is hard to grasp when one reads a single work in isolation. *On Revolution*, for example, is a meeting-place for many such currents of thought, and for that reason it will be more helpful to approach it tangentially than to devote a chapter specifically to it. Similar considerations apply to the rest of Arendt's later works, and have determined their treatment here.

Although this study ranges widely over Arendt's thought it makes no claim to be comprehensive. Many interesting aspects of her work are mentioned only in passing, particularly those that have been studied in most depth by other scholars.⁵⁴ I have concentrated on those areas in which, it seemed to me, a reinterpretation would be most helpful. Similarly, I have deliberately set out to write a work of interpretation rather than criticism, because it is my belief that many of the criticisms of Arendt previously advanced (including some in my own earlier work) have been based on misunderstandings of her thought and have therefore missed the mark. I shall aim to present Arendt's thought as sympathetically as possible, drawing attention to weaknesses only where these seem to me too glaring to make a plausible account possible. In the concluding chapter I shall consider the implications for Arendt's stature as a political thinker of the reinterpretation presented here.

⁵⁴ For example, Arendt's debts to and differences with various philosophical traditions have been considered in a number of excellent studies: see for instance Parekh, *Hannah Arendt*; Hinchman and Hinchman, 'Existentialism Politicized' and 'In Heidegger's Shadow'; R. Beiner's 'Interpretive Essay' in his edition of Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982).

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only when we recognize the human background against which recent events have taken place, knowing that what was done was done by men and therefore can and must be prevented by men – only then will we be able to rid the world of its nightmarish quality.¹

What is Arendt's book about?

When it was first published in 1951, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* established Arendt as a notable student of the political crisis of her time. For all its fame, however, the book is notoriously difficult to come to terms with. One of the reasons for this is that it does not belong to any established academic genre, and therefore confounds the reader's expectations. As Seyla Benhabib says, 'it is too systematically ambitious and overinterpreted to be strictly a historical account; it is too anecdotal, narrative and ideographic to be considered social science; and although it has the vivacity and the stylistic flair of a work of political journalism, it is too philosophical to be accessible to a broad public'.² Arendt herself acknowledged that she had employed 'a rather unusual approach', and had failed to make clear what she was doing. In the reply that she wrote to Eric Voegelin's critical review, she explained that writing about totalitarianism had faced her with a dilemma because it is of the essence of historiography to be a work of conservation, saving the past from oblivion. Her problem was 'how to write historically about something – totalitarianism – which I did not want to conserve but on the contrary felt engaged to destroy'. Her solution was to adopt a deliberately fragmented approach, tracing 'the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism' rather than writing a history of totalitaria-

* Since the later editions of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* incorporate developments in Arendt's reflections which we shall be discussing in the next chapter, references to the book in this chapter will normally be to the first edition, published in Britain as *The Burden of Our Time* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1951), referred to below as *OT1*.

¹ 'The Jewish State: Fifty Years After' (1946) in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. R.H. Feldman (New York, Grove Press, 1978) 174.

² S. Benhabib, 'Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative', *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990) 173.

nism as such. She agreed, however, that this had 'given rise to the reproach that the book was lacking in unity'.³

But the difficulties presented by *Totalitarianism* go much deeper than these questions of method. The case is not simply that Arendt used an idiosyncratic method to deal with a subject that was in itself unambiguous, but rather that there are problems in grasping what the book is actually *about*. The bewildered reader, picking his way through dazzlingly complex analyses of Disraeli, the British Empire, the philosophy of Hobbes, the idea of human rights, and all the rest of this extraordinary book, may feel that if (as Arendt wrote to Voegelin) 'the elementary structure of totalitarianism is the hidden structure of the book',⁴ then the author has hidden it rather too well. In particular, it is hard at first reading to understand the relations between the book's three parts, subtitled 'Antisemitism', 'Imperialism' and 'Totalitarianism'. Writing to Karl Jaspers while she was in the process of trying to complete the undertaking, Arendt herself remarked that what she was producing was really three books rather than one, although she could not separate them without obscuring the political argument of the work.⁵

The final section, which presents Arendt's account of 'totalitarianism' itself, a fusion of Nazism and Stalinism based upon a mass society and involving a totalitarian movement and concentration camps, is the one that has attracted most attention and that seems the obvious place to look if we want to know what the book is about. The difficulty is that this section stands in a very curious relation to the rest of the book. For although Arendt is known as one of the foremost proponents of the 'totalitarian' thesis – the thesis that Nazism and Stalinism were essentially similar⁶ – totalitarianism in this sense was not in fact the original subject of her book, and this last and most influential section was largely an afterthought. Arendt's correspondence with her publisher makes clear that her book as originally conceived would have paid no specific attention to Stalinism, and would have had only one chapter on Nazism, or 'Race-Imperialism' as Arendt called it at the time.⁷ It was only later, as she became increasingly

³ 'A Reply', *Review of Politics* 15 (January 1953) 77–8. ⁴ 'A Reply' 78.

⁵ Arendt to Jaspers, 19 November 1948, in *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, ed. L. Köhler and H. Saner (Munich, Piper, 1985) 158.

⁶ As Bernard Crick points out, Arendt adopted this use of the term without actually attempting to justify it (B. Crick, 'On Rereading *The Origins of Totalitarianism*' in M.A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: the Recovery of the Public World* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1979) 29).

⁷ Arendt to Mary Underwood, Houghton Mifflin, 16 August 1946, MSS Box 24. It would in fact have consisted essentially of the first two sections of the book that was eventually published, on 'Antisemitism' and 'Imperialism'. This is not to say that the parallel with Stalinism was absent from her mind; she had already made clear, in a book review published in September 1946, that she regarded Stalin's regime as 'totalitarian' ('The Image of Hell', *Commentary* 2/3 (September 1946) 294), and a year later she told Jaspers that the third part of her book, by now subtitled 'Totalitarianism', was still to be written from scratch because she had become aware of essential material to do with Russia (Arendt to

preoccupied with Stalinism,⁸ that the third part settled down into its final form as an analysis of totalitarianism that spanned Left and Right.⁹

This last minute shift of emphasis laid the book open to criticism on grounds of imbalance. Its extensive discussions of antisemitism and racism seemed to have little specific connection with the USSR, while the book lacked any corresponding discussion of Stalinism's ideological roots in Marxism. Arendt did have an answer to this latter criticism, to the effect that *Totalitarianism* was concerned only with the 'subterranean stream of Western history',¹⁰ not with the ways in which respectable philosophical traditions had themselves helped to make totalitarianism possible, and, as we shall see, she set out after the completion of the book to look at the other, 'higher' road to catastrophe.¹¹ Given the existing imbalance in the actual book, however, it is easy to suppose that if what interests one is Arendt's theory of *totalitarianism*, then one can concentrate on the last part without paying much attention to the rest, or to the difficult question of how it all hangs together.

But anyone tempted to take this short cut should pause to consider how it was that she was able to make such a belated shift from writing a book focussed on Nazism to producing a theory of totalitarianism in the broader sense. The answer, clearly, is that although the experience of Nazism lay at the root of her reflections, she had from the start been writing about much wider events and experiences. The case is not one of a book written specifically about a German phenomenon, which then had a Russian element tacked on to the final part. In spite of the emphasis given to antisemitism and racism, the book had never been specifically concerned with German history or culture. From the start, Arendt's approach to Nazism was to analyse it in terms of general modern developments rather than in terms specific to the relations between Germans and Jews. As originally planned and contracted for, the book was concerned with 'imperialism' rather than with Nazism as such,¹² and it was because she saw

Jaspers, 4 September 1947, *Briefwechsel* 134). But she seems to have continued for some time to think of even the final part of the book as being concerned essentially with Nazism rather than with totalitarianism in the inclusive sense. In February 1948 she reported to Paul Brooks at Houghton Mifflin that the book was now in three parts, 'Antisemitism', 'Imperialism' and 'Nazism', and that she was just starting to write the third part, on 'Nazism as the racist type of totalitarian regime' (13 February 1948, MSS Box 24 001632).

⁸ See e.g. Lecture at the Rand School (1948 or 1949) MSS Box 70; Cf. E. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982) 206–11.

⁹ By the time the book was published she had come to regard Stalinism as a *more* fully developed form of totalitarianism than Nazism. See 'Ideology and Propaganda' (1950) MSS Box 64, 5; 'On The Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS) (c.1952–3) MSS Box 69, 7.

¹⁰ OT1 ix.

¹¹ Karl Jaspers to Heinrich Blücher, 21 July 1952, *Briefwechsel* 222.

¹² As Arendt described it to Mary Underwood at Houghton Mifflin in August 1946, the book was to have four parts: I. 'The Jewish Road to the Storm-center of Politics'; II. 'The Disintegration of the National State'; III. 'Expansion and Race'; IV. 'Full-fledged

Nazism as a matter not so much of German as of *world* history that Arendt was able to incorporate Stalin's regime into her account. In a sense, indeed, when it turned out that Stalin had apparently reached much the same destination as Hitler by a completely different route, this confirmed her conviction that what she was trying to come to terms with was a phenomenon that was not specific to any one country, but was a problem of modernity itself.¹³

This is not to say that she regarded totalitarianism as the *inevitable* outcome of modernity. In the Preface to the first edition of *Totalitarianism* she made clear her opposition to any notion of historical inevitability,¹⁴ while the 'outlines' of the book that she wrote for her publisher in 1946 contain particularly clear statements of her belief that the catastrophe of Nazism could have been avoided. She spoke there of how 'subterranean streams' in Western history had been able to flow together in the vacuum created when the First World War destroyed existing political structures, and how the Nazis in particular had found a way of amalgamating these ominous currents by the use of antisemitism. She stressed, however, that Nazism was only 'one particularly dangerous and terrible amalgam', the destruction of which did not destroy the elements it had amalgamated, which could be put together in different ways.¹⁵ These 'elements' were phenomena that were available in the modern world, that were not in themselves totalitarian, but that could be used as the basis of totalitarianism in any country, regardless of its own particular traditions. To see Nazism as a specifically German phenomenon was therefore, in her view, a mistake.¹⁶ She said that when she met people who declared that Nazism had made them ashamed of being German, 'I have often felt tempted to answer that I am ashamed of being human'.¹⁷

By understanding Nazism in terms not of its specifically German context but of modern developments that could be linked to Stalinism as well, Arendt was putting herself in the ranks of the many intellectuals of German culture who sought to connect Nazism with Western modernity, thereby deflecting blame from specifically German traditions. The theory of totalitarianism has always been a political battleground as well as a field for scholarly disputes, and although the most notorious battle fought over this territory was that between the Cold Warriors and the Left about whether to call the Soviet Union 'totalitarian' and thereby tar it with the brush of

Imperialism', of which 'Race-Imperialism: Nazism' was to be the final chapter (16 August 1946, MSS Box 24).

¹³ 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS) 6-8. ¹⁴ OTI vii-viii.

¹⁵ 'Imperialism' in 'Outlines and Research Memoranda', Box 69.

¹⁶ 'Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility', *Jewish Frontier* (January 1945) 22-3; 'Approaches to the "German Problem"', *Partisan Review* 12/1 (Winter 1945) 94-5, 97.

¹⁷ 'Organized Guilt' 23.

Nazism, an equal quantity of ink has been spilt in the war between critics and defenders of German culture. Critics have had no difficulty in finding antecedents of Nazism within powerful strands in nineteenth-century German thought, notably in the Romantic critique of reason, the rejection of Western modernity and its political institutions, the exaltation of profound *Kultur* over shallow 'civilisation', and above all the ubiquitous and highly articulate antisemitism.¹⁸ The force of this argument is to stress the contrast between irrational, proto-Nazi German culture and the rational, liberal, democratic traditions of the West.

On the other side of the argument, it proved possible to exonerate German culture from any responsibility for Nazism by widening the terms of the argument, partly by setting Stalin alongside Hitler under the heading of 'totalitarianism', and partly by blaming wider tendencies in modernity as such – and therefore in the West as the locus of modernisation. While many subtle and ingenious variations on this theme are available, the most influential version has been the interpretation emanating from the Frankfurt School according to which totalitarianism is the outcome of a 'dialectic of enlightenment' engendered within the rational, liberal, capitalist West itself.¹⁹ Since the reek from this intellectual battlefield can easily obscure the view, it may be as well to get clear at the start where Arendt stands, particularly because, as so often happens, she is out on her own, skirmishing between the party-lines and fighting on both fronts. In some respects she is indeed fighting on the same side as the Frankfurt School and other German intellectuals in shifting the responsibility for Auschwitz firmly away from German culture. As we shall see, she interprets Nazi antisemitism as something very different from the long-standing quarrel between Germans and Jews, while in the connections she makes between totalitarianism and capitalist imperialism it is possible to see traces of the Romantic rejection of capitalism that is a strong element in twentieth-century German Marxism.

But if in some ways Arendt stands with the Frankfurt School's critique of modernity, she is simultaneously in the other camp as well, sharing some positions with those who would put the blame for Nazism on the rejection of enlightenment and democracy and the worship of a Romantic 'Nature'. For, like the critics of German Romanticism, Arendt did indeed believe that totalitarianism was made possible by the collapse of humanistic, enlightened civilisation. Where she differs from those critics is in attributing that

¹⁸ See e.g. G.L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology – Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1964).

¹⁹ See P. Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment – an Essay on the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980). For persuasive criticism of this sort of 'totalizing repudiation of modern forms of life', see J. Habermas (trans. F. Lawrence), *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, Polity, 1987) 338.

collapse much less to Romantic *ideas* and much more to capitalist–imperialist practices. To Arendt both Nazism and Stalinism represented *barbarism* in a sense that was much more than rhetorical. Behind her analysis, however, echo the words of Rosa Luxemburg (herself recalling a saying of Engels), who had written during the First World War, ‘*This world war means a reversion to barbarism. The triumph of imperialism leads to the destruction of culture.*’²⁰

When we find Arendt apparently fighting on both sides of this as of so many other battles, it is tempting to conclude that she must have been muddled, or at any rate indecisive. Thus, Seyla Benhabib observes that she can be seen as both ‘modernist’ and ‘antimodernist’: ‘modernist’ when reflecting on twentieth-century politics, ‘antimodernist’ when criticising the rise of ‘social’ preoccupations. Benhabib concludes that there is an unresolved ‘tension between Arendt’s modernism and her antimodernism, which almost corresponds to the Jewish and German legacies in her thought respectively’.²¹ This suggestion may well have power to illuminate some facets of Arendt’s thought, but it would be unwise to be too quick to accept a picture of her vacillating between two alternative packages, ‘modernism’ or ‘antimodernism’, because much of her own most characteristic thinking is in fact concerned with challenging the ways in which those conceptual packages are put together. Thus, one of the purposes behind her much criticised distinction between the ‘political’ and the ‘social’ is precisely to enable her to make distinctions *within* ‘modernity’, and thereby to draw the battle lines in different places.

Above all, what mattered to Arendt was to challenge the identification (apparently accepted by critics and defenders alike) between the political and the social legacies of the eighteenth century: between the kind of *political* principles asserted in the French Revolution and established in the American Republic, and the socio-economic system of capitalism. The citizen and the bourgeois are not the same.²² Instead of the usual battle-line between ‘modernising’ defenders of everything Western on one side, and ‘antimodernist’ critics of the West on the other (with each side trying to make the other responsible for totalitarianism), the battle-line as Arendt drew it ran between civilisation and barbarism, and while civilisation was ‘modernist’ and Western to the extent of embracing the republican political ideals of the eighteenth century, barbarism included not only Romantic nature-worship, but, much more significantly, the imperialists’ *practical*

²⁰ R. Luxemburg, ‘The Junius Pamphlet: the Crisis in the German Social Democracy, February–April 1917’ in R. Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike* (New York 1971) 111, 216.

²¹ Benhabib, ‘Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative’ 171.

²² In this respect as in some others, Arendt’s thought is in tune with ideas that have been recently coming into favour with political thinkers influenced by dissidence and revolution in Eastern Europe. See J. Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society* (London, Verso, 1988) 31–4.

surrender to the pseudo-natural processes set off by capitalist imperialism.

Just what this implies will become clear in due course. For the present, what needs emphasis is not only that Arendt's account of the antecedents of totalitarianism cuts across familiar controversies, but also that she differs from almost all combatants in placing much less emphasis on the influence of ideas, and much more on the establishment of *practices* that were not totalitarian in themselves, but that totalitarians could draw on. Above all, 'What is unprecedented in totalitarianism is not primarily its ideological content, but the *event* of totalitarian domination itself.'²³ As she said in relation specifically to racist theories, 'There is an abyss between the men of brilliant and facile conceptions and men of brutal deeds and active bestiality which no intellectual explanation is able to bridge.'²⁴

Because she did place so much more stress on practices than on intellectual influences, and because she did refuse to accept the kind of all-embracing antimodernism that ends in equating America with Nazism, her account of totalitarianism does have the notable virtue of bringing the reality of totalitarian terror much more vividly before the reader than most such theories. Nevertheless, the fact remains that she is concerned with much more than sheer description. Arendt herself has a theory which is quite as ambitious as its competitors, and which is founded upon her unusual and little-noticed account of what totalitarianism actually *is*. For what she means by 'totalitarianism' is not simply a regime that is particularly brutal, but something altogether more novel and dangerous. Let us now see what this is.

What is totalitarianism?

One of Arendt's most insistently repeated claims is that totalitarianism is something new and unprecedentedly terrible. It is not simply a form of tyranny, and what is special about it is not simply its cruelty. 'Suffering, of which there has always been too much on earth, is not the issue, nor is the number of victims. Human nature as such is at stake.'²⁵ If we are to understand Arendt's theory of totalitarianism we must take this statement seriously.²⁶ It should not be seen as an incidental piece of hyperbole indulged in by an overwrought representative of the community that suffered most, but as a claim that stands at the heart of her analysis, along with her repeated references to the totalitarian belief that 'everything is possible',²⁷ and her stress on the role of ideology in totalitarian regimes.

²³ 'A Reply' 80. ²⁴ OTI 183.

²⁵ OTI 433. For a discussion of Arendt's views on 'human nature', see chapter 4 below.

²⁶ This comment applies even to George Kateb's thoughtful account (G. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1984) ch. 2).

²⁷ OTI vii, 374, 414, 433-4.

Unfortunately, this particular cluster of claims is rather easily misunderstood. Readers may be tempted to jump to the conclusion that her analysis is an idiosyncratic version of a familiar conservative theme: a meditation on the disasters wrought by revolutionary ideologists who are hubristically over-confident of their power to change the world and to remould human character into a finer form. As we shall see in later chapters, Arendt was indeed wary of this kind of hubristic radicalism, but that was not at all what she understood by totalitarianism.²⁸ When she spoke of the totalitarian attempt to 'change human nature', for example, it was not futile attempts to make men good by establishing 'the Reign of Virtue' that she had in mind, but something much more sinister, an 'attempt to rob man of his nature under the pretext of changing it',²⁹ and it is in the light of this claim that we should understand her characterisation of totalitarianism as 'absolute' or 'radical' evil.³⁰ But what does she mean by attributing to totalitarians an aspiration to change human nature? In her 'Reply' to the review by Eric Voegelin, who had criticised her on this point among others, she amplified her claim to refer to 'a much more radical liquidation of freedom as a political and as a human reality than anything we have ever witnessed before'.³¹ To understand this, we need to take a preliminary look at her account of the extermination camps.

Arendt describes the camps as 'laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is . . . verified'³² by a process in which men are changed into something subhuman, creatures without the capacity for action or choice. Depriving people of rights and of the opportunity for moral responsibility are only the first steps, after which individuality itself is destroyed. In the end the inmates are reduced to 'ghastly marionettes with human faces'³³ who can be marched off

²⁸ OT1 432.

²⁹ 'Understanding and Politics', *Partisan Review* 20/4 (July–August 1953) 386; 'A Reply' 83–4.

³⁰ OT1 ix, 433. Later, and particularly when confronted by the figure of Eichmann, Arendt came to the conclusion that to speak of evil as something 'radical' was to credit it with a depth it did not possess. Instead, she drew attention to its 'banality' (*Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, Faber, 1963); "'Eichmann in Jerusalem": an Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt', *Encounter* (January 1964) 56). Although she evidently thought at the time that she was the first to use the phrase, Karl Jaspers had actually written to her of the Nazis in these terms long before: see Jaspers to Arendt, 19 October 1946, *Briefwechsel* 99. Elizabeth Young-Bruhl suggests that in making this change, Arendt 'freed herself of a long nightmare; she no longer had to live with the idea that monsters and demons had engineered the murder of millions' (Young-Bruhl, *Hannah Arendt* 367). However, if the interpretation of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism presented here is correct, she never *had* thought in terms of 'monsters and demons', and 'banality' was really a more accurate way of describing the self-abandonment to inhuman forces and the diminution of human beings to an animal species that she had all along placed at the centre of totalitarianism.

³¹ 'A Reply' 83. ³² OT1 414. ³³ OT1 426.

obediently to death. The true significance of the camps is that totalitarianism is an attempt to turn human beings into 'specimens of the human beast'³⁴ by depriving them of their individuality and their capacity to act spontaneously. Although Arendt does on occasion refer to people in this condition as 'marionettes', it is notable that she usually describes them not as artifacts but as animals, deprived of freedom and individuality.³⁵

According to Arendt's understanding, in other words, the totalitarian assault upon human nature is an attempt to create something closer to nature than human beings ought to be, and to destroy the specifically human qualities that distinguish human beings from animals, namely their individuality and their capacity to initiate action and thought. The experience of the camps shows, she maintains, 'that man's "nature" is only "human" in so far as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man'.³⁶ Human nature is a paradoxical thing, for it is of the essence of being human *not* to be in harmony with nature as it is given, not to be one specimen of a natural species. Being human means being one of a plurality of individuals, each of them different, each of them capable of starting something new, and among them capable of superimposing upon nature a human-built world. Although Arendt did not fully articulate this position until her later writings, notably *The Human Condition*, it is already presupposed in *Totalitarianism* that being properly human means being to some degree *unnatural*: initiating action; setting human limits to natural processes; creating lasting structures to house human life; laying down laws and endowing one another with rights that are 'human' but not 'natural'.

The danger of the human condition is that human power can be used to undermine itself. Perversely, human beings can turn humanism upside down, using their power to reduce themselves and everyone else to something less than human. Totalitarian regimes are absolutely evil because they do their best to establish a form of domination so intense that all that is most characteristic of human beings has to be destroyed. But what is the point of total domination? Certainly not any ordinary selfish motives on the part of the rulers. As Arendt continually insists, the activities of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes could not be explained in utilitarian terms, and were an entirely different matter from the self-interested ruthlessness in which tyrants had indulged since the dawn of time. Instead, the leaders seek total domination to make reality conform to their ideology, 'for the sake of complete consistency'.³⁷ Human spontaneity has to be destroyed and human beings reduced to predictable members of a herd so that they will not upset the logical system.³⁸

³⁴ OTI 426.

³⁵ OTI 428.

³⁶ OTI 426.

³⁷ OTI 432.

³⁸ Cf. 'Ideology and Propaganda' 19–21.

When Arendt speaks of the role of 'ideology' in totalitarianism, she uses the word in a special sense that is much narrower than ordinary usage. The key feature of an ideology in her sense is the logical consistency with which it purports to explain the past and the future. Thus, socialism is not an ideology in this sense as long as it is simply a complex of views about the condition of the working class and its causes and remedies, but becomes one only when it presents a theory about the inevitable struggle between the classes that purports to explain the past and predict the future. Arendt claimed that once a set of political beliefs became a fully-developed ideology, its specific doctrines became comparatively unimportant. What was crucial was the underlying belief in a totally closed system which was quite impervious to refutation by facts. We shall be looking later at the attraction that ideologies of this kind held for the 'masses'. In the present context, what matters is that systems of this kind have no room for the new ideas and spontaneous actions to which real human beings always give rise.³⁹

'Ideologies are harmless . . . only as long as they are not believed in seriously.'⁴⁰ Are we to suppose, then, that Stalin really believed in Marxism, or that Hitler swallowed his own propaganda? Not quite that, for, as we shall see, one of the features of totalitarian movements in Arendt's account is a kind of hierarchy of cynicism, according to which those further in toward the inner layers of the movement know better than to be taken in by the official line fed to ordinary members.⁴¹ She maintains nevertheless that each leader genuinely did believe that he had found the key to history in an endless struggle (whether of classes or races) and that both prided themselves on the ruthlessly logical consistency with which they acted in accordance with that belief.⁴² But since such ideologies were closed systems, not capable of being dented by conflicting evidence, it seemed to her in the end irrelevant whether or not those who adopted them believed their particular version to be *true*. It seemed possible to envisage a totalitarian regime directed by men for whom the distinction between truth and falsehood would no longer even make sense. For what all totalitarians really do believe, according to Arendt, is that 'everything is possible'.⁴³ If

³⁹ OT1 432. ⁴⁰ OT1 431.

⁴¹ OT1 370-4.

⁴² OT1 337; 'Ideology and Terror: a Novel Form of Government', in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd edition (London, Allen and Unwin, 1967) 471. This edition is referred to below as OT3.

⁴³ This does not mean the same thing as 'everything is permitted', *pace* some commentators (e.g. S. Dossa, *The Public Realm and the Public Self: the Political Theory of Hannah Arendt* (Waterloo, Wilfred Laurier Press, 1989) 32). In OT1 (374) Arendt makes the distinction but does not underline it, but on later occasions she spelled it out, e.g. OT3 440; 'Discussion: The Nature of Totalitarianism', in C.J. Friedrich (ed.), *Totalitarianism* (New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1964) 228.

inconvenient facts do appear to be at odds with the ideology, the facts, not the ideology, can be changed.⁴⁴

Believing that everything is possible, like wanting to change human nature and acting in accordance with an ideology, looks at first sight like the sort of mistake for which conservatives habitually castigate hubristic radicals. But what Arendt has in mind is something much more serious. It is an aspiration to omnipotence, the price of which must necessarily be human plurality and spontaneity, and therefore human nature itself. Writing to Karl Jaspers in 1951, when he had just read *Totalitarianism*, Arendt reflected on the appearance in their time of a 'radical evil', and said it seemed to her that this had something to do on the one hand with destroying human unpredictability – making men 'superfluous' as human beings – and on the other with delusions of human omnipotence. The connection between the two was that if men *were* to be omnipotent, they would have to lose their characteristic human quality of plurality and become just *one* man. Just as there is room in the heavens for only one omnipotent God, so the quest for human omnipotence entails the elimination of human plurality, and therefore of precisely the quality that makes men human.⁴⁵ If Man is to be omnipotent, human beings as individuals have to disappear. It is this insight that is at the root of all Arendt's subsequent emphasis upon the plurality of human beings.

The crucial point is that in Arendt's account, totalitarian leaders believe that everything is possible without believing in human freedom and responsibility, not even their own. Unlike ordinary tyrants and dictators, they see themselves not as holders of arbitrary power, able to do as they please, but, instead, as servants of the inhuman laws that govern the universe.⁴⁶ It is not only at the level of the followers and victims that human plurality and spontaneity have become superfluous, but even at the level of the leader himself.⁴⁷

This, then, according to Arendt, is what totalitarianism essentially is: an attempt to exercise total domination and demonstrate that 'everything is possible' by destroying human plurality and spontaneity at all levels, and ironing out all that is human and contingent to make it fit a determinist ideology. So far, she concluded, 'the totalitarian belief that everything is

⁴⁴ OT1 372, 432; 'Ideology and Propaganda' 22–4. For a more comprehensive discussion of the problems of interpreting Arendt's thinking on this point, see M. Canovan, 'Hannah Arendt on Ideology in Totalitarianism' in N. O'Sullivan (ed.), *The Structure of Modern Ideology* (Aldershot, Edward Elgar, 1989) 151–71.

⁴⁵ Arendt to Jaspers, 4 March 1951, *Briefwechsel* 202.

⁴⁶ 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS) 9.

⁴⁷ OT1 433. When, after finishing *Totalitarianism*, Arendt went on to reflect on the ways in which Marx had helped to make Stalinism possible, she developed this position further and gave it classic expression in the essay on 'Ideology and Terror' which she added to later editions of her book. We shall be discussing this in the next chapter.

possible seems to have proved only that everything can be destroyed'.⁴⁸ But how was it that this extraordinary new departure had emerged in the twentieth century? Arendt's enormously complex answer will occupy us for the rest of this chapter.

The 'elements' of totalitarianism

Arendt maintained that although totalitarianism had a nightmare originality, it was compounded from 'elements' that had developed previously and had 'crystallized' into a new phenomenon after the First World War. These 'elements' provided the 'hidden structure' of *Totalitarianism*,⁴⁹ and it will therefore be helpful if we try to sort out what they are and organise our examination of Arendt's argument round them.⁵⁰ Her own clearest explanations of these elements can be found in the 'outlines' that she wrote for her publisher in 1946: for example, 'full-fledged imperialism in its totalitarian form is an amalgam of certain elements which are present in all political conditions and problems of our time. Such elements are *antisemitism, decay of the national state, racism, expansion for expansion's sake, alliance between capital and mob.*'⁵¹

The order of the items in this list, the plan of the completed book, and Arendt's own initial preoccupations would all lead one to suppose that she regarded antisemitism as the most fundamental 'element' of totalitarianism. But this is not the case. She tends instead to speak of antisemitism as the 'amalgamator' used by the Nazis to weld the other elements into a totalitarian whole,⁵² or as the 'catalytic agent' for Nazism, the world war and the death factories.⁵³

Although it played a key part, therefore, antisemitism was not actually an essential factor. Arendt seems to have put her study of it at the beginning of the book partly because it had been her own initial preoccupation and partly for reasons of chronology,⁵⁴ but the arrangement is not a very helpful one because so much of her discussion presupposes concepts like 'imperialism' and the 'nation-state' which are not explained until much

⁴⁸ OT1 433. ⁴⁹ 'A Reply' 78.

⁵⁰ She never wrote the 'comprehensive introduction' intended at one stage to guide the reader (Arendt to Paul Brooks, 13 February 1948, Houghton Mifflin Correspondence 001632).

⁵¹ 'Imperialism', in 'Outlines and Research Memoranda', emphasis added.

⁵² 'Outline: The Elements of Shame: Antisemitism – Imperialism – Racism' (1946) MSS Box 69.

⁵³ OT1 viii. In 1967 she once again stressed that the place of antisemitism in totalitarianism was instrumental rather than essential: 'Preface to Part One: Antisemitism' (1967), in the paperback edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London, Andre Deutsch, 1986) xvi. (This edition is referred to below as OT4). Cf. 'Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps', *Jewish Social Studies* 12/1 (1950) 53.

⁵⁴ Arendt to Paul Brooks, 13 February 1948, Houghton Mifflin Correspondence 001632.

later. It will be less confusing if we analyse the other 'elements' of totalitarianism first, and leave the 'amalgamator' to the last. In a nutshell, Arendt's claim was that twentieth-century totalitarianism had been made possible by late-nineteenth-century imperialism. To refer again to her list of 'elements', the imperialists' '*expansion for expansion's sake*' had set a pattern of global conquest; the '*decay of the nation-state*' under the impact of imperialism had undermined the institutional structure that might have provided protection. In *racism* the imperialists had created a justification for conquest and a biological basis for community that made citizenship redundant, while the imperialist '*alliance between capital and mob*' showed how easily the outcasts of society could be recruited to perpetrate atrocities.

Arendt did a considerable amount of shuffling around of material, and the final order of chapters in her book does not present a straightforward sequential argument. It seems clear, however, that the most fundamental 'element' is 'expansion for expansion's sake'. At the heart of her understanding of totalitarianism lies a drive toward unlimited expansion of power, not as the means to any human purpose, but as a self-perpetuating momentum to which totalitarians were prepared to sacrifice themselves and everyone else. This quest for power was unlimited in both scope and depth: laterally, it involved a drive for world conquest in which ties to specific national territory were abandoned; vertically, it meant the pursuit of 'total domination' in the concentration camps.

Expansion

The inspiration for this nightmarish pursuit 'of power after power, that ceaseth only in death',⁵⁵ came from the theory and practice of Western imperialism, starting with the 'Scramble for Africa' in the 1880s. Arendt maintains that imperialism was something quite distinct from nationalism or from earlier forms of empire-building, and traces it to 'the bourgeoisie'.⁵⁶ Her case is that the impulse toward limitless expansion was in its origins an *economic* phenomenon, something that was inherent in the rise of capitalism. For capitalism involved the transformation of stable property into mobile wealth, the essential characteristic of which was to generate more wealth in an endless process.⁵⁷

As long as this remained a purely economic phenomenon it was disruptive but not catastrophic. The danger was that latent in capitalist economic practices was a new kind of *politics* of cutthroat competition and limitless expansion. Arendt maintains that this attitude to politics had

⁵⁵ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. M. Oakeshott (Oxford, Blackwell, 1960) 64.

⁵⁶ Against whom she is strikingly prejudiced. Cf. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 66–8.

⁵⁷ *OTI* 145.

always been just under the surface of bourgeois consciousness, and had actually been revealed in the philosophy of Hobbes, theorist of the pursuit of 'power after power'.⁵⁸ Until the late nineteenth century, however, these tendencies had been kept in check by European political institutions. When Arendt speaks of 'the recklessness that had prevailed in private life, and against which the public body always had to defend itself and its individual citizens',⁵⁹ she reveals a conviction which we shall often have occasion to note, that one of the main functions of political institutions is to act as checks and bulwarks against the forces that human beings themselves set in motion.

The significance of the imperialist era for Arendt is that the economic imperative to expand came out of the boardroom and took over political institutions. As capital was increasingly put into overseas ventures, the single-minded pursuit of profit that had previously kept businessmen out of politics led them to demand protection for their investments. The flags of the European powers followed their investors, and conquest was used to clear the way for profits. At first sight, this account of imperialism looks Marxist, but although Arendt is certainly indebted to some Marxist ideas, particularly those of Rosa Luxemburg, her analysis as a whole is quite different from theirs. For while she agreed that the imperialist drive to conquest *originated* in the imperatives of capitalism, her argument is that it rapidly loosened its ties with economic rationality and became a political principle in its own right. Having done so, it began to disrupt stable national political institutions just as capitalism had disrupted stable family property. 'Nothing was so characteristic of power politics in the imperialist era than [sic] this shift from localized, limited and therefore predictable goals of national interest to the limitless pursuit of power after power that could roam and lay waste the whole globe.'⁶⁰

It was in the British Empire that this categorical imperative to keep up the process of expansion was originally developed, and there also that Arendt believed she could see the formation of new attitudes to political action and leadership that she summed up as 'the imperialist character'.⁶¹ The imperialist bureaucrat and the secret agent – both of them serving the 'law' of expansion⁶² and prepared to break any ordinary laws to do so; both acting in secret and intoxicated by their 'alliance with the secret forces of history and necessity'⁶³ – provided precedents on which the leaders of totalitarian movements would be able to draw.

When Arendt speaks of 'bureaucracy' as a new political device discovered by imperial administrators in Egypt and India she is clearly not using the term in either of its ordinary senses of Weberian rationality or

⁵⁸ OTI 146.

⁵⁹ OTI 138.

⁶⁰ 'Preface to Part Two: Imperialism' OT4 xviii.

⁶¹ OTI 207–21.

⁶² OTI 215.

bumbling red tape. The term has a particular force for her, which emerges from her reflections on Lord Cromer's rule as British Consul General in Egypt. Three features seem to her to foreshadow totalitarian rule. In the first place, Cromer saw the country he ruled merely as a stepping stone to India, and was not interested in it or its inhabitants for their own sake. This was a political analogue of the businessman for whom each particular enterprise is only an investment opportunity, and it seemed to Arendt to point forward to Hitler's readiness to use all peoples, including the Germans, as pawns in the game of world dominion. The second proto-totalitarian feature of Cromer's rule in Egypt was its extreme secrecy. Cromer had no official authority in Egypt, and ruled behind the scenes, anonymously, without being publicly accountable. His rule was carried out by ad hoc decrees, controlled not by legislation but by the third characteristic feature of 'bureaucracy', the bureaucrat's own identification with the imperial process of expansion, of which he made himself the instrument. The same identification with the process of history and the same passion for secrecy were even more characteristic of that other stock figure of British imperialism, the secret agent playing the Great Game depicted in Kipling's novel, *Kim*. Although she writes with wry sympathy of these agents and administrators, Arendt argues that their idealism helped to undermine civilised politics based on law, and that in consenting to become servants of irresistible processes, they betrayed 'the real pride of Western man', which consists in 'giving laws to the world'.⁶⁴

The nation-state in decay

If political expansion for its own sake was one of the chief 'elements' that went into the witches' brew of totalitarianism, another that made it possible and was reinforced by it was the 'decay of the national state'. The 'nation-state' is sharply contrasted with imperialism in Arendt's thought. Whereas imperialism is a matter of letting loose uncontrollable forces of expansion and conquest to which human beings sacrificed themselves and others, the nation-state is understood as an essentially humanist institution, a civilised structure providing a legal order and guaranteeing rights, in which, for a while, 'man as lawmaker and *citoyen*'⁶⁵ held in check the bourgeois whose anarchic passion for expansion would eventually undermine civilisation. Although Arendt talks throughout the book of 'the nation state' in the abstract, she makes it clear that France, the '*nation par excellence*'⁶⁶ is her ideal-type, presenting a model toward which nineteenth-

⁶³ OT1 221. ⁶⁴ OT1 220-1. ⁶⁵ OT1 144.

⁶⁶ OT1 79, 261; Cf. 'Concerning Minorities', *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7/4 (August 1944) 360-5.

century politics tended to aspire even in manifestly non-national states like Austria–Hungary.

This classic model was a combination of two features that would in the long run turn out to be incompatible, the ‘state’ and the ‘nation’.⁶⁷ The state was a legal structure, developed under the monarchies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,⁶⁸ the essence of which was to guarantee legal rights to the inhabitants of a particular territory and to stand for their common interests. In spite of its monarchical origins, the state reached its culmination in the French Revolution, with its twin ideals of a legal order protecting the rights of man⁶⁹ and a public world within which men could be citizens.⁷⁰ Beside this legal political structure of the state stood the ‘nation’, in its (French) paradigm case a community of firmly rooted peasants, aware of the common cultural world of which they were heirs.⁷¹

It is important that both ‘state’ and ‘nation’ refer in Arendt’s usage to solid man-made structures, human worlds in which people could feel at home and for which their inhabitants took responsibility. Throughout the book they are explicitly and implicitly contrasted with rootless and therefore barbarous collections of people who lack any such world: whether the tribal barbarism Arendt attributes to black Africans, Boers and East European peoples, the new barbarism of modern masses, or the rootlessness of the Jews themselves.⁷² Another implication of this institutional and territorial solidity is that each nation-state belonged within its own limited boundaries, and therefore (in spite of frontier disputes) did not deny the right of others to exist on the same terms. Arendt contrasts this nation-state system with the dreams of world-domination characteristic of totalitarian rule. The nation-state in these senses remained a political ideal in Europe up to the time of the Treaty of Versailles, and Arendt makes clear her respect for it, particularly in its French version.

All the same, the stress of her argument is on the forces that weakened nation-states and left them vulnerable in the face of totalitarian movements. There was in the first place a profound tension between the notion of the *state* as the legal guarantor of rights, and the idea of the *nation* as an exclusive community. From the early days of the nation-state this created

⁶⁷ OTI 229–31. ⁶⁸ OTI 14, 17. ⁶⁹ OTI 275, 287–9.

⁷⁰ OTI 144. As we shall have occasion to note later, by the time Arendt wrote *On Revolution* the symbolic charge of the French Revolution had changed from positive to negative. Instead of standing for the humanist world of civilisation, it had come to stand for the torrent of barbarism that can easily be unleashed against that world.

⁷¹ OTI 229.

⁷² On ‘worldlessness’ and ‘barbarism’, cf. ‘On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing’, *Men in Dark Times* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970) 13; R.H. Feldman, ‘Introduction: The Jew as Pariah: the Case of Hannah Arendt (1906–1975)’, *The Jew as Pariah* 27, 41–5.

difficulties for Jews; more generally, it harboured dangers to the ideal of human rights that were not fully revealed until the First World War and its aftermath cast off 'national minorities' and stateless people. The chapter on 'The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man' is intended both as an explanation of why there turned out to be so few obstacles to Hitler's massacre of the Jews, and a demonstration of the need to build a new political order free from what seemed to Arendt to be the nation-state's fatal defects,⁷³ and it will be helpful to look at it briefly here.

Within totalitarian systems, one of the first steps on the road to total domination was the abolition of legal rights for large groups of people.⁷⁴ Like other elements of totalitarian rule, however, this was not a piece of diabolical originality, but was borrowed from the way in which respectable nation-states treated minorities and stateless people after the First World War. The peace treaties which created new nation-states on the ruins of the Czarist and Austro-Hungarian empires in Eastern Europe tried to cope with the new states' ethnic mix by making the League of Nations responsible for designated 'national minorities' within each country. These provisions, which of course proved ineffective, recognised ominously that only people who belonged to the *nation* could expect to enjoy the full protection of the legal institutions of the *state*.

But ethnic minorities in nation-states were in an enviable position compared with the increasing number of 'stateless' people thrown off by the political convulsions of the time. Arendt (herself for many years a stateless person)⁷⁵ relates with ironic sympathy the dilemmas of national governments faced with floods of refugees, and gives a memorable description of the situation of the stateless people themselves. Such a person finds himself outside the law of the country to which he has escaped, with no right to live or to work there, liable to imprisonment without having committed any crime, and quite at the mercy of the police. Committing a crime may in fact make him rather better off, since becoming a criminal would at least give him a recognised place within the legal order, with access to a lawyer and rights against the police. 'The best criterion by which to decide whether someone has been forced outside the pale of the law is to ask if he would benefit by committing a crime. If a small burglary is likely to improve his legal position, at least temporarily, one may be sure he has been deprived of human rights.'⁷⁶ In the 1930s, nation-states like France contained large numbers of people who were outside the law in this way, and who were often imprisoned in internment camps. Although many of these were Jews like Arendt herself, her concern with the problem goes far beyond the

⁷³ For Arendt's views on an alternative to the nation-state, see chapter 6 below.

⁷⁴ OTI 419–23.

⁷⁵ Cf. 'We Refugees' (1943) in *The Jew as Pariah*.

⁷⁶ OTI 284.

sufferings of her own people, and is centred on the incompatibility of people without rights with any kind of civilised political order, and the temptation it presents for totalitarian solutions.

What the fate of stateless people demonstrated, Arendt believed, was that the universal human rights that were supposed to belong to individuals could in fact only be claimed by citizens. For those who fell outside that category, constitutional commitments to supposedly inalienable rights turned out to be meaningless.⁷⁷ For the rights lost by the stateless were much more fundamental than those traditionally listed in declarations of the rights of man. The problem was not so much one of equality before the law as of being recognised by the law at all; not so much that they lacked freedom, as that in their shadowy existence outside the legal community their actions and opinions were of no interest to anyone. The fundamental human right is therefore the right to *have* rights, which means the right to belong to a political community.

Reflection on the perplexities of the rights of man leads Arendt to articulate the sense of the fragility and *unnaturalness* of civilised politics that underlies both *Totalitarianism* and her entire political theory. For the rights that had been supposed to follow from nature itself turned out to be dependent on membership of a man-made community. Twentieth-century experience seemed to confirm Burke's criticism of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen as a piece of 'abstraction', worthless beside the solid, inherited 'rights of Englishmen'. Those who are deprived of citizenship and put outside the law are in effect put back into a 'state of nature' which turned out to be a state of mere savagery. 'Human rights', it seems, are not a gift of nature, but part of the 'human artifice' superimposed on nature by civilisation.⁷⁸ From the point of view of those who are in the happy position of enjoying such benefits of civilisation as supposedly 'human rights', people who are not citizens but only human beings are likely to seem like an unwelcome intrusion of barbarism and to be resented. And statelessness seems to Arendt to point toward totalitarianism in two sorts of ways. In the first place, people who have no rights and are not officially supposed to exist are particularly easy to murder, as the Nazis found. But secondly, people who have been forced into a state of barbarism may, as their numbers mount, threaten civilisation from within.⁷⁹

If there were signs that pointed in the direction of totalitarianism within the very structure of the nation-state itself, that structure as a whole was threatened by imperialism. Politically, the imperialist aspiration to unlimited expansion contradicted the national principle of territoriality.

⁷⁷ OTI 290. ⁷⁸ OTI 296.

⁷⁹ OTI 298; Cf. "'The Rights of Man': What Are They?" *Modern Review* 3/1 (Summer 1949) 33-4.

Furthermore, the political ideals of popular sovereignty and citizens' rights were put at risk by imperial methods of arbitrary rule over conquered territories. Within the British Empire itself, as Arendt concedes, the lawlessness inherent in imperialist rule was confined to overseas territories. Unfortunately, however, this example was enthusiastically adopted by political movements in Eastern Europe that had no constitutional inheritance to curb their worship of power. Instead, they were already accustomed to government by arbitrary decree, to an atmosphere of secrecy in which no one knew what the rules were and acts of dominion happened without explanation. The Pan-Slav movement glorified the absolute power of the Czar as something holy, and celebrated the Russian bureaucracy for being a tremendous machine guided by one man.

This picture of a gigantic moving force in which individuals were submerged became a model for the Pan-movements, German and Slav, which, like the totalitarians after them, called themselves *movements* rather than parties. Unlike a party, a movement is something dynamic, not tied down to stable features of the world such as specific interests or a settled policy, and the change from party to movement was symptomatic of the dissolution of stable political structures that marked the age of imperialism. Movements were hostile to all established states and party systems, and proved attractive in countries where party politics was despised and hated.

This last point provides Arendt with an answer to the conundrum of why, if imperialism paved the way for totalitarianism, Britain remained so much more resistant to the infection than the continental countries. She is obliged here to fall back on an explanation in terms of political traditions, but she maintains that the relevant variable is not so much political culture as the nature of the party system in different countries. More specifically, Britain's two-party system proved capable of resisting the competition of totalitarian movements much better than the multi-party systems of Germany or France. The key point, Arendt argues, is whether or not the system encouraged a sense of public responsibility for politics, and therefore motivated politicians to support the fragile structure that stood between them and the rising tide of barbarism. In Britain, with one party in power and the other close to it, party leaders and members alike were forced to think in terms of their common responsibility for the public world, and to consider the interests of the state as a whole. Within the multi-party system characteristic of continental countries, by contrast, no party was ever more than a part of the political whole, which was itself represented by a state that was supposed to stand above parties. This situation bred political irresponsibility, with each party representing a particular interest group justified by a particular ideology. Patriotism in such a situation meant the claim to be above parties, and could easily lead to dictatorship of the type

established by Mussolini. Nevertheless, Arendt stresses that Italian Fascism should not be thought of as totalitarian, since it was a dictatorial attempt to strengthen the state and the nation. *Movements*, on the contrary, were hostile to any kind of stable political structure at all, and aimed not just to capture the state but to destroy it and replace it with the new dynamism of the movement.

The late-nineteenth-century Pan-movements seemed to Arendt to foreshadow this dynamic hostility to party system and state, which came into its own when true totalitarian movements emerged out of the ruins after the First World War, and parties, states and nations gave way under their pressure. Fascist and Communist movements, operating internationally, split existing political bodies, notably the paradigm of the classic nation-state, France.⁸⁰ In place of stable political structures held together by the inheritance of a common political world of state and nation, movements offered a rootless, dynamic fellowship united by ideology. In particular, movements of the Right were able to take over from imperialism an ideology that provided a much more appropriate basis for a political community in motion than the older sense of national solidarity: racism.

Racism

Arendt is at pains to stress that racism is not a form of nationalism, but is in many ways its opposite. Genuine nationalism is closely tied to a specific territory and culture, and therefore to the deeds and achievements of particular human beings. Race, by contrast, is a biological term, detached from territory and culture and referring to natural physical characteristics. Where people are identified by their inborn racial constitution, individual differences and individual responsibility become irrelevant: a person simply acts out the racial characteristics of his species. Racist determinism, with its ineradicable differences between 'higher' and 'lower' races, provided a perfect justification for the imperialist conquest and enslavement of native populations, while the rootlessness of a race as opposed to a nation fitted the needs of groups that were setting out on a path of limitless expansion.

As Arendt acknowledged, racist theories had a long history, going back at least as far as the eighteenth-century speculations of the French Comte de Boulainvilliers, who had maintained that his own aristocratic caste was of Frankish origin, quite different from the Gaulish peasants whom they had conquered. He and his more influential nineteenth-century successor,

⁸⁰ When she was writing about this immediately after the Second World War she believed that the collapse of European nation-states and party-systems was irreversible: see e.g. 'Parties, Movements, and Classes' *Partisan Review* 12/4 (Fall 1945) 504–13. Subsequent experience did not change her mind: Cf. J.N. Shklar, 'Hannah Arendt as Pariah', *Partisan Review* 50/1 (1983) 69.

the Comte de Gobineau, serve to make the point that racial categories can cut right across national ones, even if other forms of nationalism may have racist overtones. But mere theories about the existence of superior and inferior racial stocks seemed to her comparatively insignificant in explaining Nazism. What was at issue was not 'the history of an idea endowed by some "immanent logic"',⁸¹ but the *practice* of racism as a form of political organization. Although the existence of theoretical precedents helped to conceal its novelty, real, murderous racism arose out of the experiences and political requirements of the imperialist 'scramble for Africa'.

Arendt's explanation has two elements. Racism was adopted partly as the ideology of imperialism, providing an excuse for the exploitation and displacement of natives of conquered territories. At the same time, however (and this is where her argument becomes acutely unpalatable to many readers) it was the spontaneous and comprehensible response of civilised men confronted with savages. As should be clear from her discussion of human rights, Arendt writes as an adherent of the eighteenth-century ideal of humanity, but as a latter-day humanist, sadder and wiser as a result of twentieth-century experience. A recurrent preoccupation throughout the book is her conviction that the noble European ideal of the common humanity of all human beings is not something that is easily maintained in practice. Imperialist treatment of aboriginal populations, foreshadowing the Nazis' treatment of the Jews 'like a savage native tribe of Central Africa',⁸² made it abundantly obvious that 'common humanity' is not a given but an achievement of civilisation, and that in so far as it has been achieved it is fragile, threatened by the actual and obvious differences between peoples. She feared that in spite of the defeat of Nazism, racism would seem an increasingly attractive solution to people confronted with the problems of sharing an over-crowded earth.⁸³

It is important to disentangle the point she was trying to make from the issue of whether or not she overdoes interpretive 'generosity' toward racists,⁸⁴ or whether, as Shiraz Dossa maintains, she was actually 'ethnocentric' herself.⁸⁵ Her point is that the heroic ideal of equal humanity

⁸¹ OTI 183.

⁸² 'The Political Meaning of Racial Antisemitism' (c. 1946) in 'Outlines and Research Memoranda'. ⁸³ OTI 436.

⁸⁴ Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 61–2.

⁸⁵ S. Dossa, 'Human Status and Politics: Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust', *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 13/2 (June 1980) 320–3; Dossa, *The Public Realm and the Public Self* 35. Arendt undoubtedly shared some of the prejudices of her generation (see e.g. Arendt to Jaspers, 13 April 1961, *Briefwechsel* 471–2), and might have used different language if she had been writing now, when the descendants of her 'savages' have been incorporated into a world-wide humanity to a degree that in some ways contradicts her forebodings. Considering how little care she took to avoid offending her own ethnic group, however, one cannot be sure of this.

was put under great strain by encounters between Europeans and Africans, not so much because of the physical differences between them as because of the Africans' lack of anything that Europeans could recognize as civilisation. It was one thing to travel to Asia and encounter the ancient civilisations of India and China: quite another to explore Africa. In these circumstances, 'race was the emergency explanation of human beings whom no European or civilised man could understand and whose humanity so frightened and humiliated the immigrants that they no longer cared to belong to the same human species.'⁸⁶

What made the Africans different from their European conquerors, according to Arendt, was 'that they behaved like a part of nature . . . that they had not created a human world'.⁸⁷ As she continually reiterated, part of the human condition is that men need not accept all that is given by nature, as animals do, but can transform it and build a world of civilisation that is able to survive individuals and provide a stable setting for their lives. Since the Africans had not done this, 'they were, as it were, "natural" human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder.'⁸⁸ The point of this startling observation is that the Europeans in question *had* committed murder, but that this is something extraordinarily easy to do to victims who are not clothed in the protective garments of man-made citizenship. There is an intimation here of the plight of the victims of Nazism, who were stripped of the attributes of civilisation until nothing but the natural human being was left – something which their fellow Europeans evidently had no difficulty in killing.

The first Europeans to be plunged into an environment so hostile to civilisation were the Boers at the Cape, and practical racism as a principle of social organisation was their invention. In the process, Arendt maintains, they turned in effect into a native tribe themselves, losing 'the pride which Western man felt in living in a world created and fabricated by himself'.⁸⁹ Again, she intends a deliberate parallel between this lack of settled civilisation and the later European racist movements that attacked the civilised world. Her analysis of racism in Africa is part of the story of civilisation destroyed by neo-barbarism that is at the heart of her book.⁹⁰

Once South Africa became part of an imperially extended Europe, its lessons were rapidly learned elsewhere, and one lesson that was particularly significant was that economic imperatives are not sacrosanct. South Africa showed that it is possible for a modern society to be organised on quite

⁸⁶ OTI 185.

⁸⁷ OTI 192.

⁸⁸ OTI 192.

⁸⁹ OTI 194.

⁹⁰ Cf. S.K. Hinchman, 'Common Sense and Political Barbarism in the Thought of Hannah Arendt', *Polity* 17/2 (1984) 317–39.

uneconomic principles along racial lines. Rather than accepting its position at the bottom of the economic heap, a mob in alliance with some of the ruling class can turn itself into a master race by the violent creation of an underclass. In other words, although in Arendt's account imperialism started from the subordination of politics to bourgeois economics, it culminated in the abandonment of economic imperatives, and the adoption instead of sheer violence by men who had discovered a new form of community, a chosen race.

It was this version of imperialism that provided the model for what seemed to Arendt to be the most direct precursor of totalitarian movements, namely the 'continental imperialism' of the Pan-German and Pan-Slav movements of the late nineteenth century, which dreamed of carving out land empires in Europe to rival the British Empire overseas. These seemed to her to be closer to totalitarianism in being much more ideological than British imperialism, with less in the way of economic motivation, and therefore less restraint on ideological fantasy. Another feature of their ominous detachment from the world of solid experience and common sense was the quality of their racism. Racism as it developed among white men in Africa did at any rate (as Arendt has contentiously argued) have a basis in actual experience, just as the Western nationalism which was challenged by that racism had been a matter of pride in the visible achievements of a solidly existing nation. But the racism developed by the continental imperialists was totally ideological, because it arose on the basis of a version of nationalism that was already disconnected from the real world of actual political experience. This kind of nationalism, which prided itself not on a people's worldly achievements but on their innate soul, is labelled 'tribal nationalism' by Arendt, linking it to her contrast between the rootless, 'natural' existence of 'savages' and the man-made world of civilisation.⁹¹

'Tribal nationalism' grew up among peoples such as the ethnic groups inside Austria-Hungary and the Czarist Empire who had not succeeded in building nation-states by the nineteenth century. It is contrasted with the nationalism of peoples like the French who had been settled on a particular territory for centuries, and who thought of themselves as a collective body with historical achievements. As we have seen, Arendt was far from suggesting that French-style nationalism was unproblematic. She claimed nevertheless that it was much less dangerous than the kind developed among the rootless peoples of Eastern Europe, which had no links with civilised politics. 'Here were masses who had not the slightest idea of the meaning of *patria* and patriotism, not the vaguest notion of responsibility

⁹¹ A stage in the development of Arendt's thought on this point can be observed in her essay on 'Imperialism, Nationalism, Chauvinism', *Review of Politics* 7/4 (October 1945) 441-63.

for a common, limited community.⁹² Nationality for them was not ‘a matter of public concern and civilization’ but ‘a portable private matter’,⁹³ their innate German nature or Slavic soul, plus a conviction of their divine chosenness that was easily reinforced by a racist belief in their separate origin. Racial superiority and divine chosenness between them laid their stress on what a people *is* rather than what it does, and at the same time made individual differences between members of the people unimportant, thereby devaluing individuality and freedom. What this added up to was a ‘mass of arrogant robots’ – a formulation that clearly foreshadows Arendt’s account of totalitarian movements.⁹⁴

The stress Arendt puts on racism as one of the elements of totalitarianism may seem to sit oddly with her inclusion of Stalinism alongside Nazism as a form of totalitarianism. But within the framework of her theory the conjunction is less odd than it might seem, even though the link is not properly articulated in *Totalitarianism* itself. For (as we shall see in the next chapter) she found in Marxism an antihumanist materialism that seemed to her to cancel out individuality and reduce people to their physical constitution just as much as racism did. When she speaks, in the final section of *Totalitarianism*, of how totalitarianism reduces mankind to an animal species, she has both versions of biological materialism in mind.

The alliance between capital and mob

One of the functions that racism performed was to cement the ‘alliance between capital and mob’ on which imperialism rested. While it cannot be claimed that Arendt makes much attempt at precise categorisation, it is clear that the ‘mob’ in her terminology is not the same as the hopeless ‘masses’ whom we shall encounter in due course as the members of totalitarian movements, but refers to an altogether more active and enterprising bunch of people, desperate men thrown on to the fringes of society by the disruptions of capitalism.⁹⁵ The imperialist adventures of the late nineteenth century seemed at the time like a heaven-sent solution not only to the problem of superfluous capital but to the more threatening problem of superfluous men, who could be shipped overseas. Arendt plays upon the coincidence that these superfluities of capitalism came together at the end of the nineteenth century in a British possession, South Africa, that would itself have become superfluous as a result of the opening of the Suez Canal, had it not been for the discovery there of the most superfluous of riches, diamonds and gold. All this harping on ‘superfluity’ underlines the experiences of increasing numbers in the era of imperialism of being mere

⁹² OTI 232.

⁹³ OTI 231.

⁹⁴ OTI 234.

⁹⁵ OTI 150.

flotsam and jetsam floating on the tide of history, and foreshadows the even more helpless condition of superfluity experienced first by disoriented 'masses' after the First World War, and ultimately by victims in the extermination camps.

'The mob' should not be confused with 'the people' or the working class. Instead, Arendt describes it as the 'residue' or 'refuse' of *all* classes⁹⁶ and claims that it is a by-product of bourgeois society, closely akin to the latter in its unbridled egoism, but unrestrained by hypocrisy and ready for any crime.⁹⁷ The unholy alliance between gangsters and members of the establishment that later brought Hitler to power in Germany seems to her symptomatic of a deep affinity between bourgeois society and the mob in the streets. Capitalism had, in other words, been inadvertently breeding destructive forces – not Marx's proletariat, which was supposed to usher in a better society through revolution, but a *lumpenproletariat* with a grudge against society and an anarchic penchant for violence. Imperialism disposed of these dangerously criminal elements by exporting them overseas, where they carried out atrocities that provided a model that totalitarianism would copy and surpass. In Africa, in particular, these 'superfluous men' proved perfectly prepared to act out nihilistic Hobbesian politics in their treatment of the natives. Drawing heavily on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Arendt stresses the nightmarish unreality of these encounters, which seem to her to foreshadow the even more nightmarish world of the concentration camps. On the one hand, men who had lost any place in a settled society, and who were 'outside all social restraint and hypocrisy': on the other, incomprehensible savages. Together, they provided 'infinite possibilities' for crime.⁹⁸

Racism was immensely attractive to such men because it not only licensed their exploitation and confirmed their sense of superiority, but also provided them with a new community to which they belonged simply by virtue of their white skin. While there are echoes of Marxism in the idea that racism was an ideology used by the capitalists to get the support of the underclass, it is characteristic of Arendt's analysis that she goes beyond Marxist materialism, maintaining that racism turned out to be so attractive and so good at providing a political cement for a conquering horde that the economic interests of capital became subordinated to the logic of the ideology, first in South Africa, then in the movements of 'continental imperialism' and finally in Nazism.

⁹⁶ OTI 107, 155.

⁹⁷ OTI 327. It is characteristic of the radical, populist tone of many of her writings from the 1940s that Arendt was prepared at this stage to find *bourgeois* antecedents for totalitarianism, but not *proletarian* ones. As we shall see, her later work on the link between totalitarianism and Marxism caused her to shift her position.

⁹⁸ OTI 190.

Although many of the leaders of the Nazi Party were in Arendt's terminology members of the 'mob', rootless, unscrupulous adventurers,⁹⁹ and although mob atrocities overseas set a standard of criminality for European movements to follow, Arendt stresses here as elsewhere that there was no simple continuity between imperialism and totalitarianism. Most of the followers of totalitarian movements were not criminals, but 'masses', respectable people cast adrift by the wholesale breakdown of social structures following the First World War. Similarly, totalitarianism went beyond even the 'crimes committed in the spirit of play'¹⁰⁰ in Africa, and established totally inhuman 'machines of domination and extermination.'¹⁰¹

Of these 'elements' that went into the making of totalitarianism, then, none was totalitarian in itself.¹⁰² Only when they were welded into a new synthesis did they become so, and that synthesis was contingent, not inevitable. Nevertheless, they seemed to Arendt to represent a long-term danger, for the defeat of the Nazi synthesis had not destroyed the 'elements', and these were unlikely to disappear because they corresponded to genuine modern problems. The drive for expansion corresponded to a world that really was shrinking, forcing alien peoples to live in close proximity; the decay of the nation-state seemed to Arendt to be by the end of the War an accomplished fact, but no satisfactory substitute had been found for it;¹⁰³ racism revealed the crying need for a new global concept of humanity, while the activities of the rootless mob were a reminder that the modern world continually throws up 'superfluous people' who have no place in established societies and structures, and who may again provide both recruits and victims for totalitarian movements.

So far, we have introduced all Arendt's 'elements' except for the one she gives pride of place in her book: antisemitism. Where, then, does this fit in, and how is it related to the other elements?

Antisemitism

The moral of the history of the nineteenth century is the fact that men who were not ready to assume a responsible role in public affairs in the end were turned into mere beasts who could be used for anything before being led to slaughter.¹⁰⁴

If Nazi totalitarianism was a gigantic experiment in total domination, why was it that the Jews in particular were chosen as victims? Many students of German history and culture have believed that the explanation lies ready to hand in the anti-Jewish rhetoric of generations of highly

⁹⁹ OT1 330. ¹⁰⁰ OT1 190. ¹⁰¹ OT1 330.

¹⁰² OT1 431; 'Preface to Part One: Antisemitism', 1967, OT4 xv; 'A Reply', 81.

¹⁰³ See chapter 6 below.

¹⁰⁴ 'Privileged Jews', *Jewish Social Studies* 8/1 (1946) 6.

respectable German writers, particularly those who can be characterised as belonging to the *völkisch* movement.¹⁰⁵ But explanations of this kind seemed to Arendt to miss the point. In her view, antisemitism as an all-embracing ideology is a different matter from the conventional anti-Jewish sentiment that pervaded pre-Nazi European culture, just as it is different from earlier religious Jew-hatred.¹⁰⁶ In the end, indeed, she believed that antisemitism was used by the Nazi regime for purposes that went far beyond anything to do specifically with either Jews or Germans. It could be used as an 'amalgamator' for the construction of totalitarianism because it was linked to each of the 'elements' she had identified. The mob, hating the society to which it no longer belonged, could be easily led to focus its hostility on a group so conspicuously half in and half out of society as the Jews. The racist ideology in the name of which totalitarian movements were mobilised needed an equivalent in Europe for the natives over whom 'white men' lorded it in Africa,¹⁰⁷ and the Jews (who already identified themselves as a race) were particularly easy to cast in this role. Again, totalitarian movements needed to demolish the crumbling walls of the nation-state in order to make way for their new empires, and who was more conspicuously associated with the European state system than the Jewish financiers?

Above all, the project for global domination that was the totalitarian heir of imperial expansion found its very model in the fantasy of a secret world conspiracy by that same rootless tribe. For Arendt stresses that unlike earlier antisemites, the leaders of totalitarian movements did not merely hate and fear Jews, but set out to *emulate* them. The celebrated antisemitic forgery, 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', was used not just as an exposure of a supposed plot by the chosen race to rule the world, but as a 'textbook'¹⁰⁸ expounding the secret tactics through which a *new* chosen race could achieve global conquest. In one of the 'outlines' of her projected book that she wrote in 1946, Arendt explained that the main theme of the first part would be the question of why antisemitism could be used by the Nazis as an 'amalgamator' for totalitarianism, and the answer was, she said, that 'the Jews who have kept their identity without territory and without state, appeared as the only people that seemingly was already organized as a racial body politic. Modern antisemitism wanted not only to exterminate world Jewry but to imitate what it thought to be their organizational strength.'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*.

¹⁰⁶ 'Preface to Part One: Antisemitism', 1967, *OT4* xi, xiv.

¹⁰⁷ 'The Political Meaning of Racial Antisemitism'.

¹⁰⁸ 'Preface to Part One: Antisemitism', *OT4* xv-xvi.

¹⁰⁹ 'The Elements of Shame'. Arendt added that she intended to deal with 'this strange affinity between antisemitism and all race-ideologies' in an introductory chapter. Like the rest of her plans for explaining to her readers what she was doing, this never came to fruition.

If one of Arendt's aims in 'Antisemitism' was to explain why the Jews had been the prime victims of Nazi totalitarianism, a second objective was to argue that they should not be seen *simply* as victims. She was determined to maintain that the reasons why the Nazi version of totalitarian imperialism focussed its hostility on the Jews had to do with what Jews had done and left undone as well as with what they had unwittingly suffered. The section on 'Antisemitism' has a subtext which is in some ways even more abrasive than that which Arendt's Jewish critics detected and excoriated later in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Like the latter, it has a great deal to do with Arendt's idiosyncratic version of Zionist pride and her desire to claim for the Jews equal status as a people among peoples, with as much responsibility for world events as anyone else.¹¹⁰ Underlying her argument in *Totalitarianism*, however, is the implication that the Jews in a sense bore rather more responsibility than others, in that their lack of political sense and their existence as an apparently conspiratorial chosen race had unwittingly provided a model for totalitarian movements to copy.

Arendt is not, of course, suggesting that there really *had* ever been a Jewish world-conspiracy for the totalitarians to emulate, but she does in effect suggest that the Jews' predicament had largely been their own doing, in that they had conducted themselves in certain ways without ever asking what the political implications of their conduct might be. They had, for example, secularised their understanding of themselves as the 'chosen people', and thereby contributed to the elaboration of racist theory. In their efforts to gain admittance to high society they had 'appeared in the eyes of Gentiles as an organized group . . . ruled by mysterious laws, held together by mysterious ties and aspiring to a mysterious rule "behind the scenes".'¹¹¹ Above all, they had been conspicuously connected with the state in many European countries without developing political awareness or taking political responsibility, and for this neglect they had in the end paid a terrible price.¹¹²

The Jews and the state

It is partly because of this desire to emphasise political responsibility that Arendt starts her account with a chapter on the Jews and the nation-state. From the point of view of the reader this is a mistake, since the chapter in

¹¹⁰ Feldman, 'Introduction', *The Jew as Pariah* 21–37.

¹¹¹ 'The Elements of Shame'.

¹¹² On Jewish 'worldlessness' and lack of political awareness, see e.g. 'Portrait of a Period' (1943) 112, 121; 'The Jew as Pariah: a Hidden Tradition' (1944) 77, 90; 'Jewish History, Revised' (1948) 96–7; and Feldman, 'Introduction' 22–7, 46–7, all in *The Jew as Pariah*; also 'Privileged Jews' 4–6, 28–30. See also D. Barley, 'Hannah Arendt: Die Judenfrage', *Zeitschrift für Politik* 35/2 (1988) 116–17.

question is particularly hard to follow. Not only is the argument complex, compressed and extremely abstract, but it relies heavily upon a concept of 'the nation-state' which is not explained until much later. Furthermore, she illustrates it with examples taken from a bewildering variety of times and places, skipping from country to country and from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that this section of her theory has often been passed over in favour of the much more vivid and comprehensible chapter on 'The Jews and Society' that follows, with its spell-binding discussions of Disraeli and Proust. Nevertheless, Arendt insists that the decisive reasons for modern antisemitism were political rather than social.¹¹³ The fate of the Jews was bound up with the fate of the European nation-state, which came under attack in the age of imperialism. If that political structure could have stood firm throughout Europe (as it did in France during the Dreyfus Affair, but not in 1940) the Holocaust would not have been possible: and if Jews had themselves had more political awareness, they might have helped to defend the political bulwarks of civilisation.¹¹⁴

The development of twentieth-century antisemitism must be understood in terms of the internal contradictions of the nation-state, which had from the start placed Jews in a crucial and difficult position. As legal structures, states followed the example of the first French Republic in granting Jews equality of rights, but the simultaneous stress upon nationality put ethnic outsiders increasingly under pressure. This anomalous situation was able to persist partly because the state authorities had an interest in keeping the Jews distinct, to provide a reliable group of financiers who stood outside the class system and its conflicts. These Jewish financiers followed the tradition of the 'court Jews' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who had managed the finances of absolute rulers.¹¹⁵ As state finance increased in scale in the nineteenth century, an entire wealthy stratum of Central and West European Jewry replaced the few 'exception Jews' of earlier times, becoming state bankers for Europe, financing individual states and negotiating international loans and treaties. The symbol of this nineteenth-century Jewish preeminence was the house of Rothschild, with its family connections all over Europe.

This situation left the Jews dangerously exposed. The reason why they were able to fulfil their international role was that they had no state or nation of their own, and were actually 'Europeans'.¹¹⁶ But although they were outsiders, it was they more than any others whose fate was tied to that of the nation-state system, which took for granted the coexistence of rival

¹¹³ OTI 37, 44, 48, 87.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Feldman, 'Introduction', *The Jew as Pariah* 24–8.

¹¹⁵ 'Privileged Jews', 7–13. ¹¹⁶ OTI 22–3.

nations and the restoration after each war of a European balance of power. When the states were taken over by imperialists who thought in terms of conquest rather than balance, the Jews lost their role as international mediators. By that time, they were also being replaced in internal state finance by the bourgeoisie, who had begun to flex their economic and political muscles.

Just as imperialism began to threaten the stability of Europe, therefore, the Jews were actually losing the prominent position in economic and political affairs that had established in the popular mind a dangerous stereotype of Jewish power. The peculiar irony of the situation as Arendt describes it is that they had never in any case used that position to achieve purposes of their own, for the simple reason that they had never been sufficiently politically minded to think of doing so. Arendt claimed here and elsewhere¹¹⁷ that the Jews were political innocents. Far from being the puppet-masters of European politics, they had never had enough political acuteness even to appreciate the dangers of their own position, which, by identifying them closely with the state, provoked into antisemitism every social group with a grievance against the authorities.¹¹⁸

Although Arendt recognises that hostility to Jews also arose out of economic conditions in areas such as Poland and Russia, she maintains that the true precursors of Nazism were these waves of essentially *political* antisemitism that occurred in France, Germany and Austria–Hungary in the nineteenth century wherever a group became antagonistic to their state authorities. In the late nineteenth century the countries with the most virulent antisemitic movements were France and Austria. Arendt's argument about the Jews' ambiguous relationship with 'the nation-state' becomes more than a little tortuous when applied to Austria, since the Dual Monarchy was manifestly anything but a nation-state (or even two nation-states), but was an archaic dynastic conglomeration, constantly threatened by the national aspirations of Germans, Czechs, Poles, Ruthenians, Croats and others. But Arendt believed that these national aspirations were more akin to racism than to real nationalism, and she speaks of Austria–Hungary as a kind of honorary nation-state in which, as in the West, the state was supposed to protect the rights of all citizens and stand above the warring social groups. Just as the French state was supposed to transcend class divisions, so the monarchy in Austria–Hungary tried to stand above its feuding nationalities, making use in the process of the same outsiders, the Jews, and thereby identifying them with a ramshackle structure that had by the outbreak of the First World War become deeply unpopular with all the nationalities. The strongest hostility came from the Germans in Austria–

¹¹⁷ 'Zionism Reconsidered' (1944) 137; 'To Save the Jewish Homeland' (1948) 182; Feldman, 'Introduction' 47, all in *The Jew as Pariah*. ¹¹⁸ OTI 25.

Hungary, many of whom wished to join Bismarck's Reich and felt no loyalty whatever to their own government. In particular, Georg von Schoenerer's violently extremist Pan-German movement developed an antisemitic ideology which profoundly influenced Nazism, and which foreshadowed the later movement in aiming at a new Central European Empire in which Germans would rule the lesser breeds.

In France, by contrast, in spite of the explosive violence of the Dreyfus Affair, the more radical potentialities of antisemitism were checked by stronger political institutions. As Arendt points out, France had a long tradition of antisemitism, based partly on Leftist hostility to superstition and riches, partly on xenophobic resentment against foreigners. But all this was a far cry from Nazism. The decisive difference was that France before the First World War remained a nation-state and never developed a fully-fledged imperialist party. Her point is that the established political structures of France acted for a while as ramparts, defending laws and rights against the tides of imperialist barbarism. The crux of her analysis, however, is that the Jews had become associated with political structures that were coming under increasing attack from the new forces of imperialism. No wonder, then, that those whose aim was to sweep away states and replace them with empires were especially hostile to the Jews.

The Jews and society

Although Arendt claims that antisemitism in its virulent modern form was essentially a political matter tied to a more general attack on traditional forms of the state, she argues that in order to understand the 'specific cruelty' of modern antisemitism one must investigate the Jews' social situation, which led both Jews and antisemites to believe that Jewishness was a matter of inborn constitution. The crucial feature of the Jews' relation to nineteenth-century high society was that in so far as they were socially acceptable, it was not as equals but only as *exceptions*. No ordinary Jew could expect to be received in high society, but only those who had apparently lost their Jewish characteristics; and yet it was at the same time precisely the exotic fascination of their Jewishness that was their passport into society. They were expected 'to be and yet not to be Jews'.¹¹⁹

Within the constraints of this ambiguous situation some nineteenth-century Jews enjoyed great social success, the first group being the Jews of Berlin at the start of the nineteenth century. In salons like that of Rahel Varnhagen they mingled with aristocrats and intellectuals in what Arendt describes as a 'genuinely mixed society'. These Berlin Jews were able to

¹¹⁹ OTI 56.

maintain their self-respect because their sense of being 'exceptions' belonged to them as a group rather than as individuals. This was a very unusual situation, however. More typically, individual Jews might be accepted as 'exceptions' who were not like the 'Jew in general', but who were at the same time fascinatingly different from ordinary people. This difficult situation gave rise to a number of characteristic alternative patterns of behaviour. The most honourable choice, in Arendt's view, was not to look for social recognition, but to remain a 'pariah', in a position to develop the characteristic virtues of the outsider, which Arendt calls 'humanity, kindness, freedom from prejudice, sensitiveness to injustice'.¹²⁰ Another possibility was to become a parvenu, like the pushing Jewish businessman caricatured by antisemitic propaganda. The third and most tormenting option was to assimilate on the ambiguous condition of being Jewish and non-Jewish. This situation generated an intensely complex psychology which was in its turn experienced as being characteristically 'Jewish'.

Arendt's point is that the Jews' objective situation as political outsiders gave rise to subjective effects which diverted attention away from questions of political rights and political power. Jews really did develop a range of characteristic personalities, whether pariah, parvenu or tormented introvert, but while these were actually symptoms of political conditions, they convinced Jews and Gentiles alike that Jews were intrinsically different from other people. 'Judaism became a psychological quality':¹²¹ a disastrous development for two reasons, firstly because it concentrated Jewish attention on psychological torments and diverted them from a realistic assessment of their political situation,¹²² and secondly because it eventually convinced antisemites that Jewishness was an inborn quality, and therefore a disease that could be eradicated only by extermination. The notion that Jews were a distinct 'race' with special innate qualities was not, unfortunately, an antisemitic invention, but a belief which Jews themselves propagated, notably Benjamin Disraeli.

Growing up in England in a thoroughly assimilated family, knowing very little about Jews or Judaism, Disraeli saw Jewishness not as a handicap but as an opportunity to distinguish himself socially. By making the most of his exotic characteristics he achieved enormous success in London society. Seeing Jewishness, moreover, as a political as well as a social opportunity,

¹²⁰ OTI 66. Elsewhere Arendt made clear her admiration for certain Jews who had chosen the path of the 'conscious pariah', which meant in political terms becoming a 'rebel' like Bernard Lazare ('The Jew as Pariah: a Hidden Tradition' 76–8). According to her original plan, *Totalitarianism* was to have included a chapter on 'The Jew as Pariah' ('The Elements of Shame'). ¹²¹ OTI 66.

¹²² 'We Refugees' 60; 'Privileged Jews' 28–30; *Rahel Varnhagen: the Life of a Jewish Woman*, trans. R. and C. Winston (San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) 7, 217–18.

he produced 'the entire set of theories about Jewish influence and organisation that we usually find in the more vicious forms of antisemitism'.¹²³ In the first place, he explicitly thought of himself as a member of a chosen race – a convenient way of competing with aristocrats who prided themselves on their birth. He went beyond this, however, to assume that the chosen race acted as a political entity, elaborating a theory according to which Jewish bankers, working behind the scenes like a secret society, controlled European politics. Since Disraeli was also one of the first imperialist politicians, he provides Arendt with a classic example of the way in which Jews contributed to their own downfall.

The rest of her account concentrates on late nineteenth-century France, partly because the Dreyfus Affair represented the climax of pre-Nazi antisemitism, partly because of parallels with the social antisemitism of Germany and Austria after the First World War, but chiefly because life in the salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain had an unrivalled chronicler in Marcel Proust, himself half-Jewish. Arendt maintains on Proust's authority that Jewishness in this society had the same kind of status as homosexuality: both were seen as exotic vices, made interesting precisely by the supposed aura of evil that clung to them. Jewishness, in other words, was not a matter of choice or commitment: it was an inherent quality predisposing Jews to behave in particular ways. Arendt argues that the Jews themselves had fostered this very dangerous view in the course of their assimilation, as they lost the sense of belonging to a religious group and came to think of their Jewishness as an inborn quality, whether gift or burden. In defining themselves psychologically rather than as a religious or political group they had unwittingly put themselves in a very dangerous position, for if Jewishness really were an inborn quality, then it was also a trap. 'Jews had been able to escape from Judaism into conversion; from Jewishness there was no escape.'¹²⁴ High society might for a time be fascinated by this 'vice', but it could just as easily decide to purge itself of corruption and turn against those it had favoured. When that happened, the assumption that Jews were corrupt in their very nature helped to make thinkable the Nazi 'solution' of extermination.

Arendt's theme here is one that echoes throughout the book, and that lies at the heart of her humanist vision: that human beings are free agents whose actions and choices are never wholly determined by their natural constitution or historical situation. The book as a whole traces the appalling consequences of understanding oneself and others in deterministic ways, and the moral of this chapter in particular is that by interpreting their Jewishness as a set of natural characteristics rather than as a religious

¹²³ OTI 71.

¹²⁴ OTI 87.

or political commitment Jews contributed to the deadly antisemitism that destroyed them. At the same time, Arendt shows how very easy and natural it was, given their social and political situation, for Jews to fall into these habits of self-interpretation.

The Dreyfus Affair

The Dreyfus Affair provides a bridge between the nineteenth-century problems so far addressed and the murderous antisemitism of the Nazis. Some aspects of the Affair, such as the mobs of declassées crying ‘death to the Jews’, the legend of Jewish world-conspiracy, and the hostility to a republic suspected of being under Jewish control, clearly foreshadow Nazism. Nonetheless, all this was well short of the horrors to come, for it was contained and limited by the comparatively civilised political world of the nineteenth-century nation-state. Arendt marvels that the principles of law and justice were so much taken for granted in the 1890s that a judicial wrong done to a single Jew could excite indignation all over the Western world.¹²⁵ In the 1930s, by contrast, wholesale persecution was to be met with international indifference. Above all, there were in France in the 1890s still some people, such as Clemenceau, who were prepared to fight for the republican principles inherited from the French Revolution: for pure, abstract justice and the rights of all men. In Arendt’s account it is Clemenceau, not Dreyfus, who is the hero of the case.¹²⁶

During the Affair, establishment and mob united against Dreyfus, but neither his family nor the Jews in general had enough political sense to fight back on what, to Arendt, would have been the only appropriate ground: ‘the stern Jacobin concept of the nation based upon human rights – that republican view of communal life which asserts that (in the words of Clemenceau) by infringing on the rights of one you infringe on the rights of all’.¹²⁷ Since the case demonstrated the vulnerability of all Jews, even the apparently secure,¹²⁸ the only adequate response was a concerted political struggle for abstract justice and universal rights. But the Jews, trying their utmost to disappear into society, could not understand this. Informing Arendt’s discussion is the conviction, unspoken here but expressed controversially elsewhere, especially in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, that the Holocaust could not have happened if the Jews of Europe had had a clear grasp of political principles and the will to act while there was still time.¹²⁹

With the ending of the Affair, Arendt ends her section on antisemitism without explaining how its argument is connected to the succeeding section

¹²⁵ OTI 91.

¹²⁶ OTI 95.

¹²⁷ OTI 106.

¹²⁸ OTI 117.

¹²⁹ *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 8, 104–11, 152–3, 178–81.

on imperialism or to her eventual account of totalitarianism. Perhaps the point that most needs to be stressed here is that we are still a very long way from the end of the story. For all the ominous foreshadowings that Arendt has so far described, she maintains that nineteenth-century antisemitism was far short of Nazism. Indeed, one of the ways in which it helped to make the Final Solution possible was precisely by obscuring the radical novelty of Nazism, so that neither the Jews themselves nor many Nazi fellow-travellers realised until it was too late that something new was involved.

This new ingredient was contributed by the 'continental' version of imperialism. In the course of imperialist expansion, as Arendt admits, a certain amount of antisemitism of a traditional kind did arise, particularly in response to the activities of Jewish financiers in the South African gold rush. But this was a side-issue. The really new and lethal ingredient was the version of antisemitism developed under imperialist influence by the Pan-movements of Eastern Europe, notably by Schoenerer in Austria, which was not based on concrete grievances against Jews but on something much more dangerous, the demands of an ideology. This ideology, the version of racism Arendt calls 'tribal nationalism', provided a way of mobilising rootless people on the basis of what were supposed to be their innate characteristics, and turned inexorably to antisemitism because its pretensions reflected and clashed with the Jews' rootless existence and sense of chosenness. Arendt's contention is that it was this view of the Jews as a model and rival that was taken up and carried further within Nazism. The fact that the assault on the Jews was carried out in the name of an ideology that was a caricature of the Jews' own self-understanding was 'one of the most logical and most bitter revenges history has ever taken'.¹³⁰

Totalitarianism: Arendt's approach

The final section, on 'totalitarianism' itself, starts abruptly. Arendt plunges into an account of the support Hitler and Stalin received from the masses without attempting to justify her belief that Nazism and Stalinism were examples of a single phenomenon. She seems, in fact, to have been convinced of this by the very facts that often strike critics as evidence of crucial differences. If two regimes with such totally different origins, backgrounds, circumstances and ideologies could nevertheless act with such insane criminality, more than coincidence must be involved. When she found, moreover, that many of the characteristics she had first identified in Nazism seemed to be actually more fully developed in Stalinism, her conviction could only be strengthened.¹³¹ This convergence also seemed to

¹³⁰ OT1 242.

¹³¹ 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS) 7.

her to indicate that the totalitarian leaders had not simply blundered into their crimes, but had 'a clearer notion of what they are doing, and what they want to achieve', than was generally recognized.¹³²

The claim that totalitarianism was neither inevitable nor accidental is part of her persistent campaign to make human beings take responsibility for the political world in which they find themselves. Totalitarians, including the dictators themselves, had taken refuge from responsibility in ideologies that told them what must inevitably happen. Functionaries like Eichmann had 'just obeyed orders' and made themselves cogs in the machine of destruction. Unpolitical Jews and unworldly philosophers had failed to recognise that we are all responsible for what happens in the world. This theme, which pervades Arendt's political writings, echoes particularly relentlessly through *Totalitarianism*. What is at stake, however, is not simply a matter of being too much involved in one's own private interests to care for the public good, for she is especially concerned to stress that many of those who made totalitarianism possible did so by acting contrary to their own interests.

We saw in her account of the 'elements' that made totalitarianism possible how certain political phenomena had become detached from utilitarian motives and had gathered their own momentum. Imperialist expansion had started as a hard-headed business enterprise but then become a cause served with selfless loyalty and misplaced idealism. Even racism, which had originally served to explain authentic experiences and to justify genuine interests, had turned into an entirely theoretical ideology concerned with the supposedly inborn superiority and inferiority of certain groups. Arendt places stress on this drift away from solid, down-to-earth motivation because it seems to her to reach its apogee in totalitarianism. To try to understand the activities of Hitler or Stalin and their followers in terms of the ordinary interests that motivate political activity seems to her a waste of time. Tyranny and corruption have been all too familiar since states were invented, and the motives that led old-fashioned tyrants and their henchmen to pillage Jewish merchants or to torture rebels are wearisomely comprehensible. The point is, however, that precedents of this kind do not help one to understand why the Nazis should have devoted scarce resources to the insane project of gathering in Jews from all over Europe for extermination, nor why Stalin's regime should have filled camps with millions of people who had never dreamed of taking any subversive action and had no idea why they were there. Above all, the historical precedents do nothing at all to explain how it was that this kind of insane politics was able to attract dedicated followers.

¹³² 'Ideology and Propaganda' 6.

The masses and elite

In Arendt's view, only the selfless devotion given by those she calls 'the masses' made possible the totalitarian leaders' utter disregard for the lives and interests of their subjects. 'Masses' in this context refers partly to sheer numbers (for Arendt argues that the sheer destructiveness of totalitarianism makes it physically impossible except in countries with plenty of 'human material'¹³³) but large numbers of people are not enough to create 'masses' unless overpopulation or unemployment have made individuals feel that they are 'superfluous'. Neither should 'the masses' be identified with the lower classes, for they tend to exist where people have ceased to experience life as members of any class at all. Classes represent to Arendt relatively stable social groups with identifiable common interests, whereas the mass man's central characteristic is that he is isolated and lacks common interests with others. In ordinary circumstances, such people would have been politically apathetic, and could be safely ignored by a party structure that reflected the class system. But when war, revolution, inflation and unemployment dissolved the old social relations, the vastly increased numbers of isolated individuals became available for mobilisation by totalitarian movements.

We have seen that Arendt's analysis of imperialism included a discussion of the 'mob', declassée individuals who were both rootless and ruthless and who were particularly available for criminal activity. Her claim is, however, that the 'masses' dislocated by the aftermath of the First World War were quite different from those unscrupulous adventurers. Masses were conformists who no longer had a system to conform to, people who would have been unthinking members of the class into which they were born, if it had still existed. In such circumstances, they were no longer aware of having interests to defend; the collapse of all their expectations had left them feeling helpless, expendable, ready to give total loyalty to any cause that could give them a home. Totalitarian leaders therefore found it easy to recruit these isolated, atomised mass men.¹³⁴ In Germany, the Nazis found such masses ready to hand; in the USSR, Arendt claims, Stalin deliberately created them by attacking all social groups that had begun to acquire some stability after the Revolution.

As is her wont, Arendt writes about 'the masses' in terms of sweeping generality. Since we are interested in *Totalitarianism* rather as a fundamental document of her political thought than as a work of historical scholarship, we can leave on one side the controversy about what sort of people did join the Nazi movement, and whether they really were socially

¹³³ OTI 304.

¹³⁴ OTI 316.

isolated. One point that is relevant for our purposes, however, is that Arendt actually entertained two different explanations for the ease with which the Nazis were able to dominate the German population, only one of which depends on the 'mass man'. In an article published in 1945 she had identified as the characteristic tools of the regime 'the job-holders, and good familymen' who would do anything at all to ensure the security of their families.¹³⁵ Although this account emphasises the personal degradation produced by social and economic insecurity allied to a total lack of public responsibility, she did not think of those concerned as 'selfless' masses, but rather as people who pursued their private interests in a grotesquely single-minded way.

Since that article predates her discrimination between 'masses' and 'mob'¹³⁶ it would be reasonable to suppose that she changed her mind. As it happens, however, she speaks in *Totalitarianism* itself of the 'mass man' whom Himmler organized for mass murder as the 'philistine', the ex-bourgeois trying to safeguard his private security amid the ruins of his world, an account which once again suggests degradation rather than fanaticism.¹³⁷ There is something of an ambiguity in her account of Nazism's supporters, then, between her picture on the one hand of the totally atomised individual who becomes a fanatical adherent of the movement, and on the other of privatised family men who kept their heads down and refused to think about what they were doing.¹³⁸

Whatever her suspicions about the actual motives of particular historical individuals, Arendt probably insisted upon the 'selflessness' of the masses in order to reinforce her claims about the utterly anti-utilitarian nature of totalitarianism. The masses' putative sense of their own expendability foreshadows the expendability of the concentration camp inmates, and echoes not only the plight of the 'superfluous men' who had been the foot-soldiers of imperialism in Africa, but also the self-abandoning devotion of the bureaucrats and secret agents who served the process of imperial expansion. Her stress on selflessness also links her account of the 'masses' with her discussion of how a movement as disreputable as Nazism could have attracted the support of so many distinguished artists and intellectuals. Her explanation is partly that the European elite were violently (and, to her mind, justifiably) hostile to bourgeois society, and attracted to movements that promised to destroy it. The open exaltation of violence and cruelty by the totalitarian leaders appealed to them by contrast with the

¹³⁵ 'Organized Guilt' 22. ¹³⁶ 'Organized Guilt' 23. ¹³⁷ OTI 331.

¹³⁸ In the early article, Arendt suggested that this sort of private irresponsibility was particularly characteristic of Germany ('Organized Guilt' 23), whereas in *Totalitarianism* she is careful to present totalitarianism as a European experience, not a specifically German one. See also 'Approaches to the "German Problem"' 93-7; Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 73-4.

hypocritical morality of the bourgeoisie. But they also wanted to escape from themselves into some grand cause. The 'Front Generation' in particular exulted in the First World War not only for its destructiveness but also for the opportunity it offered them to lose themselves in mighty events, to engage in 'constant activity within the framework of overwhelming fatality'.¹³⁹ This combination of activism, irresponsibility and selflessness had great affinities with the weird unworldliness of totalitarian movements.

The fictitious world of the totalitarian movement

Bohemian artists (like the mob whose company they tended to seek) were fascinated by the open violence of totalitarian movements; but what attracted the masses was, Arendt claims, their propaganda. Unlike ordinary political demagoguery, this did not appeal to its audience's interests and promise them benefits. What it offered instead was a reassuring claim to infallibility, prophecy based on a supposed insight into the inevitable forces of history. Although the theories and predictions that the movement offered were contrary to common sense, this was no deterrent to belief, since (Arendt claims) common sense was precisely what the 'masses' no longer possessed.¹⁴⁰ Bereft of social status and communal relations by unexpected catastrophes, they had lost their ability to distinguish reality from unreality and had become hungry for any doctrine, however preposterous, that would reveal some kind of consistent pattern within the bewildering events of their time.

The great charm of totalitarian propaganda, therefore, was that it allowed the masses to escape from incomprehensible reality into fiction. Totalitarian movements established 'a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself', providing the 'uprooted masses' with a home and protecting them against 'the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations'.¹⁴¹ Their imaginary world of propaganda enabled them to 'shut the masses off from the real world'.¹⁴²

Once in power, such movements can alter the real world to make everything fit, but Arendt points out that their propaganda was used for practical, organisational purposes long before that. For example, the Nazis did not merely repeat the familiar antisemitic myth of Jewish world-conspiracy. Instead, they modelled themselves on the fiction of a

¹³⁹ OTI 324.

¹⁴⁰ On the relation between common sense and 'the world', see chapter 4 below. See also Hinchman, 'Common Sense and Political Barbarism'.

¹⁴¹ OTI 343. ¹⁴² OTI 343.

conspiratorial master-race, and recruited a master-race of their own by demanding proof of non-Jewish descent from their members. Antisemitism was no longer a matter of opinion but a principle of identity and status, giving atomised individuals a place within the *Volksgemeinschaft* of the movement.

Throughout her account of totalitarianism, Arendt persistently stresses that what made Nazism and Stalinism totalitarian was not their opinions but the ways in which they acted on them. This was true not only of the regimes but also of the movements, which were organized in such a way that even under nontotalitarian conditions, a society was already created 'whose members act and react according to the rules of a fictitious world'.¹⁴³ Instead of doing what other political parties do, that is, organising themselves to win power within the world as it already exists, totalitarian movements were so organised that they were separated from normal life and its rules and prepared to launch a radical attack on existing reality. Arendt describes a series of devices that functioned as 'protective walls'¹⁴⁴ behind which the movement could take leave of the normal world and its assumptions and prepare itself to act on the principle that 'everything is possible'. One such device was the line drawn between party members and front organisations, which hid the gap between the insane aims of the movement and the reality of the normal world. From the point of view of the party member, the knowledge that thousands of fellow-travellers sympathised in a less consistent way with his views prevented him from realising how contrary to common sense these were. From outside, on the other hand, those who encountered only the front organisations got a misleading impression of normalcy and respectability that hid from them what the movement was really about. Similar structures occurred within the movement itself, where there were layers within layers, each more militant than the one before: a kind of malignant onion.¹⁴⁵

Among the characteristics that made the masses perfect recruiting grounds was 'a mixture of gullibility and cynicism'. Traumatic experiences had conditioned the masses to 'believe everything and nothing, to think that everything was possible and that nothing was true'.¹⁴⁶ On the one hand, they were prepared to swallow fantastic claims made by the leader, but on the other they were just as ready to admire his cunning when these claims turned out to have been lies. Those in the inner layers of the movement were further up in the 'graduation of cynicism',¹⁴⁷ and took for granted that a good deal of the movement's propaganda was intended merely to fool outsiders, while still assuming that central planks of the movement's ideological platform, such as the Nazi dogma of Jewish

¹⁴³ OTI 353. ¹⁴⁴ OTI 356, 361.

¹⁴⁵ 'What is Authority?', *Between Past and Future – Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Viking Press, 1968) 99. ¹⁴⁶ OTI 369. ¹⁴⁷ OTI 371.

inferiority, really were true. The elite formations, however, no longer needed to believe that Jews were really inferior, only that they were to be treated as such. Facts and reality had become merely things that could be changed.¹⁴⁸

Perhaps the most baffling feature of Arendt's conception of totalitarianism, and the point she has most difficulty in communicating, is that the mixture of 'gullibility and cynicism' goes right up to the top of the movement or regime. Totalitarian leaders were not fanatical believers on the model of religious fundamentalists, for they were quite prepared to alter their official line when it suited them. On the other hand, they were not just cynical machiavellians who manipulated other people's beliefs. Arendt speaks of their conviction that everything is possible, and that 'everybody who commands the instruments of violence with the superior methods of totalitarian organization can become infallible'.¹⁴⁹ On the face of it, this sounds like a kind of vastly overinflated humanism, a hubristically exaggerated faith in the power of human beings to remould the world in accordance with human imagination, and it is in this sense that George Kateb has interpreted Arendt's position.¹⁵⁰ What such an interpretation misses, however, is her persistent claim that totalitarianism is totally contrary to humanism and to the free play of human creativity. The price of total domination was the extinction of creativity, even on the part of the leaders themselves.

For the sting in the tail of the totalitarians' supposed discovery that 'everything is possible' was that omnipotence could be gained only by working *with* inhuman forces, not against them: Arendt speaks of their 'gigantic principled opportunism'.¹⁵¹ Having, as they believed, discovered the destructive laws of race-struggle or class-war, the totalitarian leaders could ride with the torrent, levelling the flimsy dykes that protected the human world. This account of totalitarianism is fully articulated only in the essay on 'Ideology and Terror' that Arendt wrote while reflecting on the totalitarian elements in Marxism, but it is clearly anticipated in the first edition of *Totalitarianism*. There she explicitly claims that Hitler and Stalin genuinely believed that the condition of their success was action in accordance with the supposed 'laws' of nature or history, and argues that this obedience to what were imagined to be impersonal laws and forces was foreshadowed in the lives of such men as Lawrence of Arabia, who had abandoned 'the real pride of Western man' in favour of satisfaction at becoming 'a functionary or agent of the secret forces which rule the world'.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ OTI 373. ¹⁴⁹ OTI 375.

¹⁵⁰ Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 79 ¹⁵¹ OTI 431.

¹⁵² OTI 220. Cf. Canovan, 'Hannah Arendt on Ideology' 159-61.

Totalitarian regimes

We saw earlier how Arendt contrasted the solid, limited political structure of the nation-state with the dynamic instability of imperialism. Totalitarianism is in her view a direct heir of imperialism in this respect. Any ordinary state, however authoritarian it may be, is at least a *structure* with a definite shape and definite limits. Totalitarianism, by contrast, is not so much a structure as a movement in perpetual motion, more like a natural process than like something built by human beings. When such movements gained control of states, outside observers naturally assumed that they would settle down and adjust to the ordinary realities of power. Contrary to all expectations, however, the regimes of Hitler and Stalin did not become less radical and terroristic or acquire stable structures. Instead, their regimes remained peculiarly shapeless, with laws and constitutions that were unrepealed but blatantly unenforced, offices that were multiplied, jurisdictions that overlapped and centres of power that shifted continually.

Chaotic administrative shapelessness is scarcely a recipe for efficiency, but Arendt continually stresses that ordinary utilitarian considerations were not important within totalitarian regimes. These were not states protecting specific interests, but movements interested in remaking reality for ideological reasons on a global scale. Their central organ in doing this was the secret police, which came into its own when all genuine opponents of the regime had been dealt with and the hunt for 'objective enemies' began. Unlike the 'suspects' hunted by the secret police of old-fashioned despots, an objective enemy is someone who does not intend to threaten the regime, and is not even suspected of doing anything against it, but who becomes an enemy by ideological definition. Jews in Nazi Germany were of course in this position, but Arendt insists that the actual identity of the group concerned is secondary. Totalitarian regimes need such enemies to keep up the momentum of terror, and when one group has been eliminated they have no difficulty in identifying a new class of victims. The job of the secret police, therefore, is not to ferret out genuine opponents, but 'to be on hand when the government decides to arrest a certain category of the population'.¹⁵³

The ultimate development of totalitarianism comes when even the notion of the 'objective enemy' is abandoned in favour of a completely random selection of victims for liquidation, thereby destroying any remaining sense that people are responsible for their fate.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, the secret police do their best to ensure that even the memory of the victims vanishes from

¹⁵³ OTI 403.

¹⁵⁴ OTI 409.

the face of the earth, so that those arrested disappear into 'holes of oblivion' as though they had never existed.¹⁵⁵

Throughout her discussion, Arendt draws analogies between totalitarian movements and secret societies, and she goes on to suggest that the true secret society in a totalitarian regime is the secret police, while the secret they guard is what happens in the concentration camps. These are kept from the world so that the rulers can carry out experiments in total domination. Totalitarian leaders come to power with a 'faith in human omnipotence', a conviction that reality will not impose any limits to their ideological fictions, but it is only gradually that they discover 'the full implications of this fictitious world and its rules'.¹⁵⁶ At the heart of totalitarianism, in Arendt's view, lie the concentration and extermination camps, and the difficulty of understanding totalitarianism lies above all in the problem of comprehending what happened in this 'central institution'.¹⁵⁷ In *Totalitarianism* and elsewhere¹⁵⁸ Arendt repeatedly stresses this incomprehensibility, which made even those who had survived the camps begin to doubt their own recollections.

What made accounts of life and death in the camps so hard to credit was not so much the scale of suffering involved but its apparent senselessness, its lack of utilitarian purpose, the fact that the rulers did not gain anything from their appalling cruelties. She suggests quite seriously that they are so far removed from any ordinary human purposes that only images drawn from a life after death can describe them, and that the Nazi extermination camps in particular closely resemble medieval pictures of Hell. She insists on this parallel partly to underline the unreal, fantastic quality of life in the camps, which somehow prevented both victims and torturers from believing that these things could really be happening.

If concentration camp society is insane, unreal, barely credible, there is no comparable difficulty in understanding the stages by which the victims were reduced to the condition of living corpses. In the first stage, they were stripped of their juridical personality as bearers of rights, and put outside the law and the normal penal system. Genuine criminals became a kind of aristocracy in the camps, most of whose inmates were not even accused of any crime. Secondly, moral personality was undermined by the anonymity of a system that made martyrdom impossible, and by arrangements that implicated the victims in the killing. With rights and moral responsibility

¹⁵⁵ OTI 411. After following the evidence at Eichmann's trial, Arendt concluded that despite the efforts of the totalitarians, they never succeed in erasing memory entirely, which makes it even more important that there should be stories to be told of heroic action against overwhelming odds (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 212). ¹⁵⁶ OTI 412. ¹⁵⁷ OTI 414.

¹⁵⁸ 'The Image of Hell' 292; 'Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps' 49-64.

taken away, all that remained of humanity was sheer individuality, and that too was systematically destroyed by bestial treatment. In the end, what was left was a kind of animal that was no longer human, and that could be totally dominated and marched meekly off to death.

It is this, however, which Arendt sees as the point of the camps and their apparently meaningless horrors. The purpose of totalitarianism is to reduce human beings to 'bundles of reactions' with no spontaneity, and while this was achieved only in the camps, these 'experiments' served to train the elite troops in techniques of total domination and to terrify the rest of the population into apathy. The ultimate aim of totalitarianism, in other words, is to convert human beings into subhuman creatures, all identical, all incapable of spontaneity, and all equally superfluous. 'Precisely because man's resources are so great, he can be fully dominated only when he becomes a specimen of the animal-species man.'¹⁵⁹

All this apparently senseless horror and suffering is given a sense of its own by totalitarian ideology, in which all other considerations are sacrificed to an insane logical consistency. If reality does not fit the implications of the ideology, reality must be destroyed, and since human beings are creative and unpredictable, they too must be reduced to something less than human. 'No ideology which aims at the explanation of all historical events of the past and at mapping out the course of all events of the future can bear the unpredictability which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it.'¹⁶⁰

Conclusion

Hotly disputed ever since its first publication, Arendt's account of totalitarianism is certainly vulnerable to critical objections, particularly from historians of Germany and the Soviet Union. From the point of view of political theory, however, such objections are less powerful, because, like Burke on the French Revolution, Montesquieu on the British Constitution or Tocqueville on America (all of whom she greatly admired) she was less interested in writing history than in presenting a model of the political possibilities and dangers of her time. This becomes clear when, after painting her picture of 'total domination', she starts her 'Concluding Remarks'¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ OTI 428. ¹⁶⁰ OTI 432.

¹⁶¹ The later editions of *Totalitarianism* end with the essay on 'Ideology and Terror', which does in a sense sum up Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism, but which articulates what she called 'certain insights of a strictly theoretical nature . . . which I did not possess when I finished the original manuscript' ('Introduction' (1966) OT3 viii). Those insights were part of the reflections on the 'totalitarian elements in Marxism' to which she went on after publishing *Totalitarianism*, and 'Ideology and Terror' can be best understood in the context of those reflections, as we shall see in the next chapter.

by observing that totalitarianism has never yet been completely developed, and perhaps never will be, since it could be fully realised only in an empire that covered the whole world. Only if there were no hiding places left could 'the process of total domination and the change in the nature of man begin in earnest'.¹⁶² The point of trying to understand it, in other words, was not only to clarify what already *had* happened in Germany and Russia but to issue a warning about the political predicament of modern humanity. For it was Arendt's conviction that 'totalitarianism became this century's curse only because it so terrifyingly took care of its problems'.¹⁶³

What did Arendt mean by these 'problems'? In the first place, she speaks of mass experience of 'superfluity on an overcrowded earth',¹⁶⁴ a sense of the worthlessness and senselessness of human life which was institutionalised in the concentration camps. She stresses that she is not referring only to potential victims who had become expendable, but also to the sense of their own expendability shown by the rulers themselves, which had been faintly foreshadowed in the service of imperialist expansion, but which was expressed on an entirely different scale when totalitarian leaders sacrificed their own interests and eliminated human freedom in accordance with a meaningless ideology. 'The manipulators of this system believe in their own superfluity as much as in that of all others'.¹⁶⁵

Up to a point, this stress on superfluity is a comment on the political and social dislocation that had cast off millions of refugees and unemployed people who no longer had a place in the world. However, Arendt makes clear her belief that the modern predicament goes even deeper than that, and that the sense of superfluity has more metaphysical aspects. For the crimes of the totalitarian regimes have, she says, revealed the collapse of Western civilisation with its implied standards and beliefs. What this collapse reveals is a situation with terrible dangers. For the first time in history, it has become possible and necessary to make political provision for the entire human race. For good or ill, 'mankind' is at last a political reality, as the totalitarian aspiration to global rule had recognised. Furthermore, enormous powers are available to this new humanity (even though these powers were exaggerated in the hubristic belief that 'everything is possible'), and the totalitarians' willingness to destroy anything that did not fit their fictitious world illustrates 'modern man's deep-rooted suspicion of everything he did not make himself'.¹⁶⁶ This new, enormously powerful modern humanity is no longer prepared to take any standards as given.

What the catastrophes of totalitarianism reveal, therefore, is that we are faced with an alarmingly open future, flung (in existentialist terminology) into a world without apparent meaning, given no guidance, condemned to

¹⁶² OTI 429.¹⁶³ OTI 430.¹⁶⁴ OTI 431.¹⁶⁵ OTI 433.¹⁶⁶ OTI 434.

freedom. Totalitarianism provides an ideal ‘solution’ to this crisis because it combines a sense of infinite power with a total lack of human responsibility. The totalitarian leaders, denying their own freedom and destroying that of others, carrying out their ideology like robots programmed for destruction, are prime examples of Heideggerian inauthenticity or Sartrean *mauvaise foi*. Faced with the alarming fact that ‘the power of man is so great that he really can be as he wishes to be’,¹⁶⁷ modern men are likely to find this escape into nihilism all too appealing.

The only alternative, Arendt argues, lies in a deliberate new beginning, acknowledging that mankind is now a reality with a common fate, but recognising also that there is no guaranteed happy ending. What this involves is in the first place a conscious assumption of responsibility for political acts, not just those committed by one’s own community but all over the world; secondly the recognition and punishment of ‘crimes against humanity’, and thirdly the guarantee to all human beings of the one fundamental human right for which Arendt had argued earlier in the book, the right to citizenship. No moral or political order is bestowed upon men by nature: instead, human beings will have to construct one for themselves. As Arendt comments, ‘The greatness of this task is crushing and without precedent.’¹⁶⁸ One blessing *is* given to us, however, which we should recognise in gratitude, and the implications of which we shall appreciate in due course: that human beings are plural, both as races and as individuals, that ‘not a single man but Men inhabit the earth’.¹⁶⁹

Looking back over Arendt’s theory of totalitarianism, we can see that her thinking moves within the framework of a contrast between two alternative political responses to the predicament of modern humanity. On the one hand, adopting a tactic of which totalitarianism was the extreme form, human beings can maximise their power and minimise their responsibility by pretending not to be human, that is, not to be plural and free: they can side with inhuman forces, make themselves and others into members of an animal species, submerge their capacity for thought in the relentless automatism of single-track logic. Alternatively, they can face up to and accept the implications of their humanity, which means accepting their plurality, their freedom to act and to think, and their joint responsibility to establish a world between them, to set limits to the forces of nature and to bestow rights upon one another. As we shall see, Arendt’s mature political thought flows directly from these preoccupations.

¹⁶⁷ OTI 427.¹⁶⁸ OTI 437.¹⁶⁹ OTI 439.

3 'Totalitarian Elements in Marxism'

From *Totalitarianism* to *The Human Condition*

Readers of Arendt's published work are often puzzled by the lack of apparent connection between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the books that are usually thought of as her major works of political theory, *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*. One of them has gone so far as to say that her work 'seems to divide sharply into two parts',¹ while others have gained the impression that after writing *Totalitarianism* Arendt turned thankfully away from the horrors of the twentieth century to indulge herself in idealisation of the Greek polis.² But although the connection between her earlier and later work is not obvious on the surface, it is in fact very close. This is one of the points at which her unpublished writings shed most light on the interpretation of her published work, for when we read her lectures and essays from the early 1950s we can follow her trains of thought and see the organic connection between her reflections on the human condition and her attempt to come to terms with totalitarianism. The connecting link, and the subject of this chapter, is her work on Marx.

The Origins of Totalitarianism was, as critics pointed out from the start, a lop-sided book, in which the attention paid to the antisemitism and racism that gave birth to Nazi ideology contrasted sharply with the book's silence on Marxism-Leninism. As we have seen, Arendt's answer to this objection was that she had deliberately avoided discussing Marxism because of her wish to draw attention to the 'subterranean currents' out of which totalitarianism had emerged, and to stress the degree to which it constituted a radical break with Western political and philosophical traditions.³ Nevertheless, having done this, her intention (as she explained in her application for a Guggenheim Fellowship which she was awarded in April

¹ R.H. King, 'Endings and Beginnings: Politics in Arendt's Early Thought', *Political Theory* 12/2 (May 1984) 235.

² S.J. Whitfield, *Into the Dark: Hannah Arendt and Totalitarianism* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1980) 134, 158-60.

³ 'Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism' (1951-2) Correspondence with the Guggenheim Foundation, MSS Box 17, 012649.

1952) was to fill the gap with another book on 'Totalitarian Elements in Marxism'. This was to be a different kind of book, for she realised from the beginning that the antecedents of Stalinism and of Nazism were not symmetrical, and that her new project would require a new approach. For unlike the antisemitism that had acted as the 'amalgamator' in Nazi totalitarianism, Marxism was unquestionably a product of the mainstream Western tradition of political thought. Consequently if there were indeed totalitarian elements to be found in it, this must have wider implications. As she put it in one of the many manuscript writings in which she pondered the matter in the early 1950s, 'to accuse Marx of totalitarianism amounts to accusing the Western tradition itself of necessarily ending in the monstrosity of this novel form of government'.⁴ Her initial Guggenheim proposal therefore stated her intention to provide 'the missing link between the unprecedentedness of our present situation and certain commonly accepted traditional categories of political thought'.⁵

In fact, as we shall see, this quest for the sources of Marxist totalitarianism led her right back to the beginnings of Western political thought, and in the process expanded far beyond the compass of the book she had originally intended to write. The sections of her work that did find their way into print – the essays in *Between Past and Future*, *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution* – stand before the reader in apparent isolation, but they are all connected by her unpublished writings from this period, particularly the successive drafts of the lectures on 'Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought' which she delivered at Princeton in 1953. Her investigation of Marxism turned out to lead in so many directions and to raise so many complex issues that her original project of a companion piece to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was never accomplished, and her analysis of what it was about Marxism that contributed to totalitarianism never clearly explained in print. Discussions of Marx appear at several points in her published work, but they are too brief, condensed and lacking in context to fill the gap. One of the main objects of the present chapter will therefore be to clarify her view of Marx's relation to totalitarianism, while showing in more general terms how her study of Marx led to *The Human Condition*. In doing so, we shall deliberately leave aside questions about the accuracy or otherwise of her interpretation of Marx.⁶

⁴ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought' (first draft, short MS, 1953) MSS Box 64, 3.

⁵ 'Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism', 012649.

⁶ Cf. W.A. Suchting, 'Marx and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*', *Ethics* 73 (October 1962) 47–55; B. Parekh, 'Hannah Arendt's Critique of Marx' in M.A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1979) 67–100.

Before we embark on tracing Arendt's reflections about Marx and the great tradition of Western thought, however, we need to note that this was not the only context within which the link with Stalinism posed problems for her. Classic political philosophy was not the only cherished heritage that was called into question by the event of Marxist totalitarianism: so, much more obviously and immediately, was the entire radical heritage of the Left. Another of the complex strands of thought that leads from totalitarianism to Arendt's later political theory is concerned with how something as appalling as Stalinism could have emerged, not from antisemitic groups frequented by cranks and thugs, but from a radical movement that represented the most humane political ideals of the West, and in which great numbers of admirable people (including Arendt's own husband) had been involved. Reflections on this problem are continually under the surface of Arendt's thought from about 1950, periodically breaking through. One aspect of the problem, which we shall be discussing in chapter 5, has to do with the way in which high-minded morality gets perverted in politics and people find themselves condoning appalling acts for idealistic reasons. But the problem is wider than that, for once Arendt began to study Marx she found that her reflections were leading her in a direction that went against her original political sympathies.

She had not herself ever been a communist, as had her husband, Heinrich Blücher. At the time of the controversy over *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963, when Gershom Scholem described her as one of the 'intellectuals who came from the German Left', she denied this, pointing out that she had not even been interested in politics when young, still less impressed by Marx.⁷ But although this was true, it was not the whole story, for after her escape from Nazi Germany in the 1930s she had picked up from Blücher and from the writings of Bernard Lazare a kind of radicalism that is easily apparent in her early writings, and that included not only a pronounced hostility to 'the bourgeoisie' but also a rather romantic sympathy with 'the people' and the labour movement.⁸ This radical populist orientation is clearly visible in *Totalitarianism*, in which, as we have seen, she is not only extremely hostile to the bourgeoisie, but also takes care to distinguish 'mob' and 'masses' from 'the people', 'the workers' movements' or the working class.⁹

⁷ "'Eichmann in Jerusalem': an Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt", *Encounter* (January 1964) 53.

⁸ See e.g. 'The Jew as Pariah' (1944) 71, 76, 81; 'Zionism Reconsidered' (1945) 140, 152; 'Peace or Armistice in the Near East?' (1950) 214, all in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. R.H. Feldman (New York, Grove Press, 1978); 'Christianity and Revolution', *The Nation* (22 September 1945) 288-9.

⁹ *The Burden of Our Time* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1951) 107-17, 189, 310. (This edition is referred to below as OT1.) One of her purposes in developing the concepts of 'mob' and 'masses' may well have been to dissociate the working class from those who supported imperialism or totalitarianism.

Apart from a habit of radical discourse that placed her writings up to about 1950 somewhere to the left of centre, Arendt also had (and continued to have) a 'sympathy . . . for all oppressed or underprivileged peoples' which (as she later had occasion to declare) she took for granted as a member of a persecuted group.¹⁰ It was therefore food for thought when she found her work on Marx leading her to question radical pieties. Before embarking on it she had thought of Marx, too, essentially as a rebel fired by a passionate zeal for justice for the oppressed, and had argued the point with Karl Jaspers.¹¹ By the time that she was on her way to Princeton to deliver the lectures on Marx and the Western tradition, however, she had changed her mind about Marx¹² and come to see the situation of the working class in a different light. The era of McCarthyism, when 'Ex-Communists' were making a career out of denouncing their former comrades, was not a time at which she could wish to stress this change of mind.¹³ Nevertheless, in tracing Marx's contribution to totalitarianism, she had now become convinced that there was also a link of some kind between the extinction of freedom and the emancipation of the working class, a link that she explored in *The Human Condition* and in *On Revolution*. As we shall see, the problem of how to square this insight with her radical sympathies, and how, in practical terms, freedom and equality can be reconciled, became another of the concerns of her mature political theory.¹⁴

The train of thought that most overtly links *Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, however, arose out of her conviction, reaffirmed when she applied for a renewal of her Guggenheim Fellowship in January 1953, that Marx 'cannot be adequately treated without taking into account the great tradition of political and philosophical thought in which he himself still stood',¹⁵ for although Marx was a conscious rebel against tradition, his rebellion was conditioned by the assumptions in which he was steeped. Arendt's way of embarking upon her task of identifying the totalitarian elements in Marxism was therefore not only to study Marx's own work, but

¹⁰ 'Reflections on Little Rock', *Dissent* 6/1 (Winter 1959) 46.

¹¹ 'Privileged Jews', *Jewish Social Studies* 8/1 (1946) 6, 22; Arendt to Jaspers 25 December 1950, Jaspers to Arendt 7 January 1951, Arendt to Jaspers 4 March 1951, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, ed. L. Köhler and H. Saner (Munich, Piper, 1987) 196, 199, 203.

¹² Arendt to Jaspers 13 May 1953, *Briefwechsel* 252.

¹³ 'The Ex-Communists', *Commonweal* 57/24 (20 March 1953) 595–9; *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958) 79. (This edition is referred to below as *HC*.)

¹⁴ This discussion represents a correction of the position I put forward in an article on 'The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought' in 1978 (*Political Theory* 6/1 February 1978). Although I had at that time noticed the strains in Arendt's thought to do with 'labourers', I had not grasped the importance of the radical populist element in her early thought, and therefore misinterpreted the ways in which her ideas changed in the 1950s.

¹⁵ Arendt to H.A. Moe, 29 January 1953, Guggenheim Correspondence 012641.

to read her way through the entire canon from Plato to Hegel (in five languages).¹⁶ As she did so, her investigation deepened and became an enquiry with many layers. There were in the first place meditations on intellectual tradition itself: on its nature and origins, and on how it could be possible to understand anything in a world in which the thread of tradition had been broken by totalitarianism. Then there was Marx's own rebellion against traditional assumptions, and the ways in which, in trying to respond to the challenge of new events, he had unwittingly helped to make totalitarianism possible. Beyond that, it turned out that those traditional assumptions about politics had themselves contributed to this end, because they had from the beginning been defective. But meanwhile, even if traditional political theory had been less misleading, the events and developments whose first stirrings Marx had so fatefully attempted to confront were authentic changes and really did present new problems that could not be solved in traditional terms, but demanded a fundamental rethinking of political experience.

It needs to be emphasised that all these complex thought-trains start from the catastrophes of her time and return, after generous loops and windings, to the fundamental problem of how to face up to those catastrophes. Arendt's many-stranded examination of the ways in which Marx had helped to make totalitarianism possible continually echoes her analysis in *Totalitarianism* of the way in which the process of capitalist-imperialist expansion had swept away the comparatively stable structure of the nation-state and levelled the fences of law that are needed to protect a fully human existence. Similarly, her rethinking of political experience is not just a piece of 'Hellenic nostalgia'¹⁷ but is addressed to the same dilemma that had given *Totalitarianism* its context: the weird tension in twentieth-century politics between 'reckless optimism and reckless despair'.¹⁸ Having (as she believed) found much the same combination of determinism and hubris in totalitarianism, in imperialism, in Marxism and (as we shall see) in other aspects of modern life, she thought it essential to clarify both the potentialities and the limits of human action; on the one

¹⁶ When Arendt lectured on Tocqueville at the University of California in 1955, she was evidently struck by the similarity of his approach to her own. Her lecture notes contain a heavily emphasised quotation from J.P. Mayer's book on Tocqueville recording how he had himself read Plato, Machiavelli, Burke etc. while trying to understand his own time: 'He felt a need to measure the wealth of his American observations against the whole Western heritage of political doctrine.' Quoted from J.P. Mayer, *Prophet of the Mass Age: A Study of Alexis de Tocqueville* (London, Dent, 1939) 15, in Arendt's 'Lectures on the History of Political Theory' (1955) MSS Boxes 40-1 024094.

¹⁷ N. O'Sullivan, 'Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society' in A. de Crespigny and K. Minogue (eds.), *Contemporary Political Philosophers* (London, Methuen, 1976) 228-51; J.N. Shklar, 'Hannah Arendt as Pariah', *Partisan Review* 50/1 (1983) 71. ¹⁸ OTI vii.

hand to raise the humanist banner of action, insisting that heroism is always possible even in the most tragic circumstances and against the most overwhelming odds; and on the other hand to warn against the dangers of hubristic over-confidence and the need for limits, particularly for the limits set by the political institutions plural men can establish amongst themselves.

Arendt did to a large extent carry out this programme within her own reflections, though she had much less success in communicating her conclusions to her readers. In view of the scope of her agenda, however, it is not surprising that she never completed the book on Marx that she had intended to write. Her starting point was a train of thought apparently (but only apparently) leading away from totalitarianism, on the problem of tradition.

Tradition

Looking back at Marx, who had, she thought, been moulded by a tradition of thought going back to Plato and Aristotle even while he believed himself to be rebelling against it, Arendt observed that in her own time there was no longer any tradition left to rebel against. The old certainties, the sense of continuity with the past, above all the sense that inherited ideas and institutions possessed authority, had disappeared, leaving Western culture as 'a field of ruins'.¹⁹ Although the advent of totalitarianism had completed this process, and had quite literally meant the end of the world for her own milieu of highly cultivated German Jews, she was well aware that the break with tradition had been under way for some time, for she had herself grown up among philosophers who were trying to think without the guidance of traditional categories. In retrospect, the continuity in political thinking from Plato to Marx seemed to her more striking than the numerous upheavals and reversals within that tradition, while she felt herself to be standing in a 'gap between past and future' no longer 'bridged over' by traditional patterns of thought.²⁰

One immediate result of this situation was that it was now possible to become conscious of the tradition itself, to stand outside it and think about it, and therefore to become aware that tradition is a special intellectual and political phenomenon, not something that must exist everywhere and at all times. Tradition is not equivalent to the past: it is a particular and selective

¹⁹ 'Tradition and the Modern Age' in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Viking Press, 1968) 28.

²⁰ 'Preface: the Gap Between Past and Future' in *Between Past and Future* 13; Cf. S.S. Draenos, 'Thinking Without A Ground: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Situation of Understanding' in Hill, *Hannah Arendt* 209–24.

relationship to the past, handing on and reinforcing particular ideas, experiences and structures and suppressing others. Arendt argued in *Between Past and Future* that this particularly hallowed relationship to aspects of the past had been invented by the Romans, along with authority and religion.²¹ In some respects, the twentieth century loss of tradition had been a disaster: Arendt was convinced, for example, that totalitarianism could not have happened if traditional religion had been in place, and one of her preoccupations, which we shall explore in later chapters, was how stable political structures could be built without traditional authority. Another ill effect was the danger of shallowness, as men lacking easy access to the past's store of experience lost the dimension of depth that tradition had given.²² For all that, the contemporary intellectual situation held opportunities as well as costs. 'With the loss of tradition we have lost the thread which safely guided us through the vast realms of the past, but this thread was also the chain fettering each successive generation to a predetermined view of the past.' The break offered 'the great chance to look upon the past with eyes undistracted by any tradition' and therefore to recover experiences which the predominant tradition had omitted or suppressed.²³

We shall see in later chapters that this sense that it was possible to make a new start in political theory formed the basis of Arendt's most ambitious project, an attempt to rethink political concepts in the light of the political experiences that had been ignored or distorted within the mainstream of Western philosophy. For the moment, however, the sense of being left with no choice but to move without guidance in the gap between past and future was directly relevant to the problem with which her intended book on Marx was to have begun: the problem of how to understand something which, like totalitarianism, is quite new. How can we get our minds round 'something which has ruined our categories of thought and our standards of judgment'?²⁴ Arendt answers with the affirmation that was to become one of the most characteristic of all her doctrines: the affirmation of the human capacity for *beginning*. New and unforeseen events are the very stuff of politics and history, for human beings are originators and each new person is a new beginning: in the quotation from St Augustine which she used so often, 'That there might be a beginning, man was created.' A being who can act in ways that no one can foresee or predict can perhaps also

²¹ 'Tradition and the Modern Age' 25; 'What is Authority?' (also in *Between Past and Future*) 125. ²² 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section III, 20.

²³ 'What is Authority?' 94; 'Tradition and the Modern Age' 28.

²⁴ 'Understanding and Politics', *Partisan Review* 20/4 (July–August 1953) 391. For the place of this essay in Arendt's projected Marx book, see her letter to Moe, 29 January 1953, Guggenheim Correspondence 012642; Also E. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982) 278.

think in new ways and understand new events, bringing creative imagination to bear upon them. Even though traditional categories can no longer be trusted, and totalitarianism would not fit into them even if they could, 'a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality'.²⁵

Arendt's 'Marx' book was to have continued by relating Marx himself to the main tradition of Western political thought and showing how his rebellion against it was still conditioned by its assumptions. In her essay on 'Tradition and the Modern Age', the form in which this part of her enterprise found its way into print, she linked Marx with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, who stood in a similarly ambiguous relationship with traditional thinking.²⁶ She argued that Marx's central doctrines are best interpreted as a conscious rebellion against the tradition of political thought going back to Plato and Aristotle; that Marx attempted this reversal because he was acutely aware that the new developments represented by the industrial and political revolutions of the previous half-century were not catered for in the tradition, but that because he was still so entangled within traditional ways of thinking, he failed to see some of the crucial implications of his own teachings. She believed that his theory can be summed up in three statements, 'Labor created man', 'Violence is the midwife of history', and 'The philosophers have interpreted the world long enough; the time has come to change it.' In each case, the doctrine acquires its force by contradicting head-on what had seemed the eternal verities of the tradition. For example, 'Labor created man' manages within one short phrase to challenge the traditional belief that *God* created man, the traditional definition of man as the *animal rationale* and the traditional view that labour is the lowest human activity.²⁷

So far, all Arendt might appear to be saying is that, being a profound scholar as well as an original thinker, Marx knew exactly how radical his ideas were, and how revolutionary the trends of his time. But her point is that his attempt to respond to these revolutionary new developments was seriously flawed because his thought was not radical *enough*, but remained limited by traditional assumptions. For example, he showed remarkable prescience in predicting a future in which government would give way to administration and increased productivity bestow leisure upon the masses, but the spell of traditional thinking led him to picture this future on the model of the Athenian polis, and therefore to view the trends of his time in

²⁵ 'Understanding and Politics' 390–1; Cf. 'The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism' (1953) MSS Box 68, lecture I.

²⁶ 'Tradition and the Modern Age' 25–39; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section I.

²⁷ 'Tradition and the Modern Age' 21–2.

idealised or utopian terms.²⁸ But this is a comparatively minor instance of what seemed to Arendt to be the contradictions and dangers inherent in Marx's attempt to twist traditional categories to cover new experiences. The central problem, as she had stated in her original project for the book on Marx, lay in Marx's conception of man as a 'working animal', and its connection with his view of history as something produced by man. It was this that lay at the heart of the 'totalitarian elements in Marxism': 'Marxism could be developed into a totalitarian ideology because of its perversion, or misunderstanding of political action as the making of history.'²⁹ Our next task will be to look at what Arendt meant by this, but before we do so, it must be emphasised that Arendt was not trying to blame Stalinism on an intellectual slip. As we shall see, her argument was that Marx's misunderstanding arose in the course of his attempt to confront the two great problems arising out of the industrial and political revolutions, 'the problem of labor and the problem of history'.³⁰ His failure to do so exposed both the inadequacies of the traditional concepts with which he worked, and the intractability of the modern problems with which he struggled. We shall have a lot more to say about both the modern problems and the traditional concepts. First, though, let us turn to Marx's concept of man as a 'working animal' and to the understanding of history he developed from it.

Marx's concept of man as a 'working animal'

The significance for Arendt of Marx's concept of man was not just that it flew in the face of the ancient definition of man as a 'rational animal'. More relevant to the link between Marx and his totalitarian descendants was that his concept of a 'working animal' was deeply ambiguous. In forming it, Marx took over from traditional thought a confusion between two quite different experiences that had never (for reasons that Arendt would later explore) been clearly distinguished. From the beginning of her investigation into the 'totalitarian elements in Marxism' Arendt recognised that 'work' as Marx used the term included both 'man's metabolism with nature' on the one hand and the making of the human world on the other, or the activities that she would describe in *The Human Condition* as 'labour' and 'work'.³¹

In contrast to her usual practice of making novel distinctions without acknowledging their novelty, Arendt admitted that she was innovating by distinguishing between these two activities. In justification for doing so, she pointed to the existence of parallel terms in several European languages as

²⁸ 'Tradition and the Modern Age' 18–21. ²⁹ 'The Ex-Communists' 597.

³⁰ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft, short MS) 3.

³¹ 'Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism' 012649.

well as the manifest differences between the activities themselves.³² This, it appeared, had been one of the many cases in which the great tradition of European thought had passed over or distorted experiences that did not fit the preoccupations of its dominant minds. The tradition had been founded and passed on by men who despised the material side of life too thoroughly to be interested in distinguishing between its different aspects.³³ As a result, when Marx responded to the revolutions of his own time by challenging the tradition and exalting the material side of life, he had no awareness that two different activities were involved. But the two, as Arendt argued at length in *The Human Condition*, are really very different indeed. ‘Work’ or fabrication is one of the prime activities by which human beings distinguish themselves from nature and assert their mastery over it. Using nature as raw material, *homo faber* works on it to produce an object which is artificial and which stands as objective proof of his activity. Collectively, the products of work make up the human artifice of civilisation, the man-made world that stands between human beings and nature, and which Arendt had contrasted with barbarism throughout *Totalitarianism*. But labour is in Marx’s own phrase ‘Man’s metabolism with nature’,³⁴ the activities arising out of the biological necessity of staying alive and keeping the species going. Growing, preparing and consuming food; bearing and rearing children; neither gives rise to any product other than the endless, repetitive life of the species itself.

Arendt agreed that the two activities overlapped and could be hard to distinguish, particularly under the conditions of modern society,³⁵ and in the next chapter we shall be looking more closely at some of the problems involved. Nevertheless, she believed that the central experiences involved were very different, not to say contradictory. Even more important, neither was a good model for politics. In this respect, each had its own dangers; but when Marx tried to base politics upon a revalued concept of material life that confused the two, its implications turned out to be totalitarian. Let us now try to see why this should be so.

The dangers of understanding politics in terms of Work

Arendt did not suggest that Marx was by any means the first to interpret politics in terms of making things: on the contrary, it was one of the ways in which he was misled by the tradition he inherited. The habit of misunderstanding politics by assimilating it to the model of work was in fact ‘as old as the tradition of political philosophy’, traceable right back to Plato’s analogies between the model that guides a craftsman in making a

³² HC 79–80.

³³ HC 81–5.

³⁴ HC 98.

³⁵ HC 124–5.

bed and the Idea that guides the philosopher-king in making the perfectly just society.³⁶ Unfortunately, the relationship between a craftsman and his material is a dangerously unsuitable model for political relations between people. Work is a matter of transforming material in order to make something: domination, violence and the sacrifice of the means to the end are inherent in the activity of fabrication. When this model is applied to politics, which is concerned with dealings between plural persons, it is other people who become the material to be dealt with violently and sacrificed to the end that is to be achieved.³⁷

We shall have occasion in a later chapter to look at Arendt's reflections upon the Machiavellian topic of the justification of political violence, in the context of a wider discussion of her views on politics and morals. For the moment, our concern is with the implications of Marx's concept of man as a craftsman who can be in control of his material, and can 'make history' as he makes a table.³⁸ This side of Marx's theory seemed to Arendt to be humanist in its tone, but nevertheless dangerous because of its implications of the violent moulding of plural men to a single end. What seemed to her to make his thought potentially totalitarian, however, was that this humanist stress on 'work' was inextricably interwoven with a far from humanist stress on 'labour', which had quite different implications that were also destructive of political freedom.

Marx himself did not, of course, distinguish between 'work' and 'labour'. Like his liberal predecessors, Locke and Smith, he placed great emphasis upon the productiveness of man's material activity, its achievement in making objects and in building the human world. But Arendt maintains that his main preoccupation was actually the sheer labour of subsistence, in spite of his 'misrepresenting the laboring, non-productive activity in terms of work and fabrication'.³⁹ The implications of subsuming politics within labour were, she believed, momentous.

The dangers of understanding politics in terms of Labour

As Arendt stressed over and over again, Marx's exaltation of the traditionally despised activity of labour was not a piece of intellectual perversity but an authentic response to a real change that was taking place out in the world in his time, and that had gained momentum since.⁴⁰ In *The Human Condition* and in *On Revolution* she was much concerned with this

³⁶ HC 229. ³⁷ HC 139-44; 228-30.

³⁸ 'Religion and Politics', *Confluence* 2/3 (September 1953) 115; 'The Concept of History', *Between Past and Future* 79.

³⁹ HC 306, 85-8, 101-2.

⁴⁰ HC 105-6; 'Tradition and the Modern Age' 32; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft, short MS) 3-7.

change, as we shall be later. Nevertheless, Marx's shift of intellectual emphasis seemed to her to be tremendously significant. Understanding politics in terms of 'work' might be dangerously hubristic, but was at any rate humanist, whereas thinking in terms of 'labour' meant surrendering human values altogether. For the crucial feature of labour is that it is the least free aspect of human activity. The compulsion to satisfy bodily needs is imposed by nature upon men as it is upon animals. Those needs are endlessly repetitive and pay no regard to human individuality: as far as bodily needs go, men are just interchangeable members of another animal species, caught in the endless natural cycle of seeking their food and consuming it, of birth and death.

Ever since the start of the Western tradition of political thinking, the activity of labour had been despised because it represented this biological substratum of subjection to necessity underlying even the most civilised human life.⁴¹ By the time of Marx, however, for reasons that Arendt would go on to investigate in *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*, labour was rising to a new status, symbolised by the emancipation of the labouring classes. According to Arendt, it was this momentous change that Marx's theory articulated, although his failure to distinguish 'labour' from 'work' prevented him from being fully conscious of what he was doing. Consequently, although he believed that his own theoretical and practical endeavours were directed towards a future in which human beings would be fully free and masters of their own destiny, what he was actually forwarding and articulating was the exact opposite: the emergence of a society entirely geared to the labour that is necessary to serve biological life, in which human individuality would be submerged in a collective life process, and human freedom sacrificed to that process's inexorable advance. In such a society, politics would indeed 'wither away', since the sole purpose would be 'the entertaining of the life process' of a 'socialized mankind'.⁴²

Arendt's case was, then, that within Marx's concept of man as a 'working animal' two different views were concealed, with different but equally damaging implications for politics. In so far as Marx defined man in terms of labour, the 'metabolism with nature' that is necessary to keep the species alive, the trend of his thought was necessitarian, anti-humanist, surrendering the human freedom to act to the inexorable workings of natural processes. But alongside this understanding of man as labourer, Marx's theory also continued the model of fabrication, of making things, of free human creativity rather than the service of natural necessity. This was certainly a humanist vision, though unfortunately a bad model for politics

⁴¹ HC 81.

⁴² HC 89, 45, 116, 255, 313; *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973) 64. This edition is referred to below as *OR*.

because of its connotations of violently transforming material to achieve the desired results.

Now, the reader may at this point be prepared to concede that Arendt has put her finger on a fundamental contradiction in Marx's theory, but object that this contradiction can scarcely be a source of 'totalitarian elements in Marxism' because the humanist and anti-humanist sides must cancel one another out. But this objection misses the point of Arendt's analysis of Marx and, more generally, of totalitarianism. The secret of totalitarianism, she had concluded, was its *combination* of the surrender to necessity with the belief that 'everything is possible', and she maintained in parallel terms that Marx succeeded in uniting the two sides of his theory into a potent cocktail that would become lethal in the hands of Stalin. What enabled him to unite these two apparently divergent strands was his novel understanding of history, to which we must now turn.

Marx and history

In some lecture notes from the period in 1952–3 when Arendt was working out what it was about Marx that made his ideas a seed-bed of totalitarianism, she summed up her theory by saying that he was 'the first to see history in terms of past politics, made by men as laboring animals. Then it must be possible to make history in the process of Labor, of Productivity, to make history as we make things.'⁴³ There are three elements here: the notion of history as a *process*, the identification of that process with the *labour* process, and the notion that man can *make* history. Arendt believed that their combined impact had been politically catastrophic, but she acknowledged that each had roots extending well beyond Marx, though not, in this case, stretching right back to the beginning of Western traditions.

The first conclusion that she arrived at in her reflections on Marx and history was that *all* modern understandings of history were fundamentally different from anything to be found in ancient or medieval thought. The whole conception of history as a constant flow, concerned with the development of mankind and continuous with the evolution of nature, was very recent and by no means self-evident. For the Greeks, for example, history did not represent a single story, but the many different stories of memorable deeds with which men, 'the mortals', interrupted the endless, cyclic processes of nature. Even the medieval Christian concept of history, which told a single sacred story of Fall and Redemption, was not really a precursor of the modern conception, since most secular events were not

⁴³ 'The Impact of Marx' (c.1952–3) MSS Box 68.

part of the story at all. Only in modern times has history come to be seen as a single all-encompassing process stretching backwards and forwards to infinity, and Arendt came to the conclusion that this had a great deal to do with the modern understanding of nature, which was also based on the category of 'process'.⁴⁴ Following the rise of experimental science after Galileo, 'nature, because it could be known only in processes which human ingenuity . . . could repeat or remake in the experiment, became a process, and all particular natural things derived their significance . . . solely from their functions in the over-all process.'⁴⁵

One of the motives for seeing history in a similar light was, she believed, the human desire to overcome mortality. The ancient Greeks had seen their pluralistic histories as a way of preserving the great deeds of mortal men from oblivion, but this impulse had lost its impetus with the founding of the great tradition of philosophy. Ancient philosophers no longer needed to worry about earthly immortality, for the contemplation of eternal essences gave them access to a timeless realm.⁴⁶ Christianity, which promised eternal life to all, popularised this notion, so that it was only when the vivid faith in eternal life began to wear thin that human mortality again disturbed Western thinkers, who turned to a different kind of history to overcome it. The great events of the American and French Revolutions of the eighteenth century confirmed the suspicion that if meaning were to be found anywhere, it was in history considered as a process: the history of mankind considered as a single immortal individual.⁴⁷

It was Hegel who gathered together these threads and put forward a spell-binding interpretation of history as a single story with a plot, a dialectical process in which truth was revealed to the backward glance of the philosopher. This new philosophical interest in mundane political events might seem like a 'capitulation of thought before action', but in fact, as Arendt pointed out, it involved a thorough distortion of human affairs. The trouble was that the *single* story Hegel found in history superseded the multitudinous stories of the real human individuals concerned. For plural human beings, Hegel substituted the World-Spirit or Mankind, so that in his vision, 'history is one gigantic fabrication process where one single subject . . . eventually produces . . . meaning'.⁴⁸ Already in Hegel's theory, then, we can see one of the elements that would according to Arendt make Marx's historical theory a basis for totalitarianism: the idea of history as a *process*, with its implication that individual lives are only parts of a larger

⁴⁴ 'The Concept of History' 42–8. ⁴⁵ HC 296.

⁴⁶ 'The Concept of History' 42–7, 71–3.

⁴⁷ 'Philosophy and Politics: the Problem of Action and Thought after the French Revolution' (1954) MSS Box 69 023385; 'The Concept of History' 75.

⁴⁸ 'Philosophy and Politics' 023388. This is part of the context for Arendt's stress on the story that can be told about each individual life (HC 184–6).

whole. Marx's crucial variations on this were to interpret it as the *labour* process, and to encourage the aspiration that man can control this process or *make* history.

Once Hegel had constructed his philosophy of history, it was a short step for Marx to eliminate the 'idealist' elements in it and turn it into a 'science'. For Hegel, the single subject whose story unified the process of history was the *Weltgeist*, and Marx aimed to demystify this by replacing it with a new subject, Mankind. As Arendt frequently pointed out, however, 'mankind' is *not* a single subject: on the contrary, 'men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world',⁴⁹ and men's actions are contingent and highly unpredictable, and do not add up to a single story. Why, then, was Marx's theory so plausible? Arendt's answer is that the story Marx told was the story of a new mankind that really *does* behave like a single and predictable subject, and that really was becoming increasingly manifest at the time when Marx was writing – 'socialized mankind'.⁵⁰ What this means is in the first place human beings understood as 'labourers', with the focus on their biological life, and in the second place human beings understood as members of 'society', in which these basic biological concerns are collectively organised. Both of these points require some elaboration.

Human beings, as Arendt constantly stressed, are plural beings, unique individuals capable of constant surprises. Nevertheless, this individuality does not manifest itself in all aspects of life. Before we can act we must eat, and as far as sheer physical necessities are concerned we really are 'species-beings', in Arendt's version of Marx's terminology. At the level of biological life, that is, of 'labour', human beings are all subject to the same necessity. 'In so far as we all need bread, we are indeed all the same'.⁵¹ Now, in ancient times this was a commonplace with little theoretical relevance, but Arendt's argument is that since early modern times, these biological aspects of life have assumed greater and greater prominence. Formerly the private affair of separate households, they have come out into public view and increasingly been catered for collectively. 'Economy', which originally meant the management of the household, gradually acquired its modern sense of 'national housekeeping', that is to say of a life process that was no longer private but collective.⁵² For reasons that we shall have occasion to examine later, this collective life process was experienced in the modern period as an inexorable process moving in the direction of economic development.

Arendt agrees, therefore, that Marx's theory of history as the process of labour was based on the solid experience of social and economic development in recent times. Furthermore, his belief that it was this process

⁴⁹ HC 7.⁵⁰ HC 116.⁵¹ OR 94; HC 46.⁵² HC 33, 44–7, 89, 116.

that underlay and dictated political events was supported by the striking experience of the French Revolution. For the overwhelming impression made by the French Revolution was that those who started the Revolution did not control its course, but were swept away by a seemingly inexorable process, and in *On Revolution*, Arendt argues that this observed process of necessity was actually the expression of *biological* necessity, that is to say, of the experience of poverty. The most momentous feature of the French Revolution was that it let the multitudinous poor into high politics, and these poor people who suddenly appeared upon the public stage were united in their subjection to iron necessity, 'the urgency of the life process itself'.⁵³

It seemed to Arendt that in view of the rise of 'society', which had turned economic needs into matters of common public concern, and the experience of the French Revolution, which had brought the poor and their desperate struggle for bread into politics, Marx's interpretation of history as the process of labour showed extraordinary perspicacity. The utopian and misleading side of his theory arose because he failed to see how alarmingly deterministic these developments were, and instead cherished the wholly utopian expectation that this process of economic necessity would eventually lead to freedom. One of the crucial reasons for this, she believed, was his confusion of labour with work. Thinking of history as the process of labour, he took it to be a product of work, something *made* by men, and therefore something that could be made consciously and freely. As with other technologies by which men had increased their powers, the way to do this was to discover the natural laws according to which the process worked.⁵⁴

There were several things wrong with this project. For one thing, as we have seen, thinking of politics in terms of 'work' and making things is always a dangerous analogy. Making things is a violent business in which material is used as a mere means to the end to be realised, and if history is to be 'made', all means must be justified by an end of such vast significance.⁵⁵ However, the further implications of Marx's project seemed to Arendt to be even more sinister than this. 'Making' history is impossible because men cannot control events: all they can do is *act*. Even if mankind could be combined into a single actor (at the price of destroying the plurality of human beings) the trouble with actions is that they tend to unleash processes that their authors cannot control. If human beings set out to make history by using what they take to be the natural laws of the historical process, what they are liable to find themselves doing is actually speeding up the natural processes to which men are subject.

⁵³ *OR* 47–54, 60.

⁵⁴ 'Philosophy and Politics' 023388.

⁵⁵ *HC* 228–9; 'Religion and Politics' 115.

According to Arendt, this is precisely what Marx encouraged, providing a theoretical articulation of 'the abdication of freedom before the dictate of necessity'.⁵⁶ To understand what she is getting at, we need to hear the echoes here of her account in *Totalitarianism* of the imperialists' surrender to the process of expansion, and we also need to be aware of an aspect of the context of her thought about Marx and totalitarianism that we have not yet mentioned: the shadow of the atomic bomb. The 1950s, when Arendt was thinking about Marx, totalitarianism and the human condition, were the period of the Cold War, when thinking people were for the first time facing the real possibility of full-scale thermonuclear war and reflecting upon the double-edged implications of modern science. Totalitarianism and the bomb were linked in Arendt's mind as the two fundamental experiences of her time,⁵⁷ and both of them showed the same contradictory feature, the combination of a hubristic sense that 'everything is possible' with the experience of being in the grip of unstoppable processes. Modern men want to be masters of their fate, but seem to find themselves instead at the mercy of the processes they set off. The analogy between politics and science is an essential piece in the jigsaw of Arendt's thought, and we need to look at it more closely.⁵⁸

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

To Arendt, the story of modern science illustrates the dangerously paradoxical nature of human achievements. Her prologue to *The Human Condition* begins with some comments on the first space-craft, then just launched, which was for her a symbol not just of the technological prowess of modern man but of one of his most significant dispositions, a rebellion against the human condition to the point of wanting to escape from the earth itself. Modern man, she says, seems 'to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given . . . which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself'.⁵⁹ This revolt against the limits of the human condition is no mere romantic gesture. Centuries after Archimedes declared, 'Give me a place to stand and I shall move the earth', human beings have in a sense realised that dream. They have escaped from the limits of the earth: but only to discover, as so often happens when dreams come true, that their achievements have unexpected

⁵⁶ OR 61.

⁵⁷ 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' (c. 1956) MSS Box 60,002.

⁵⁸ Cf. B. Cooper, 'Action into Nature: Hannah Arendt's Reflections on Technology' in R.B. Day, R. Beiner and J. Masciulli (eds.), *Democratic Theory and Technological Society* (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 1988) 316–35, although Cooper does not bring out the linkages in Arendt's thought between technology, totalitarianism and modern socio-economic development. ⁵⁹ HC 2–3; Cf. OT1 434–5, 438.

costs. Arendt liked to quote Kafka: 'He found the Archimedian point, but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition.'⁶⁰

The 'boomerang effects' of the triumph of modern science are of course most visible in the case of nuclear weapons, those symbols of humanity's capacity to use its powers for self-destruction. The particularly paradoxical feature of this is that nuclear fission is a manifestation of man's unique power to 'act', that is, to take initiatives and to start unique chains of events.⁶¹ Although, as we shall have cause to consider later, action is for Arendt the locus of human freedom, it would be a mistake to suppose that her intention was to recommend it without reservation. Even when what is at stake is action simply amongst human beings, there are problems and pitfalls, as we shall see; but acting *into nature* in the manner of modern nuclear physicists is a peculiarly risky business. It is of the essence of action to set off chains of events, processes which acquire their own momentum. When such action is taken by scientists whose science has long ceased to be earthbound, and who are capable of starting processes never before seen in earthly nature, things have unprecedented potential to go out of control.⁶²

The implications of scientific progress strike Arendt as being heavily paradoxical, producing both power and helplessness, freedom and determinism. Even at a theoretical level science has in a sense been self-defeating. Ever since Galileo's telescope showed that although nature cannot be trusted to reveal truth of its own accord, it can be trapped by man-made instruments,⁶³ experimental science has become more and more ingenious in its devices for penetrating beneath the deceptive surface of things. The difficulty is that as experimental techniques become more and more elaborate, so the true reality they are intended to uncover seems to recede from us. All the scientists can actually hope to discover is a set of measurements recorded by sophisticated instruments which have been designed to test specific theories. Arendt continually quotes the physicist Heisenberg to the effect that in modern science, instead of uncovering reality, 'man encounters only himself'.⁶⁴ For all its immense achievements, science therefore 'puts man back . . . into the prison of his own mind, into the limitations of patterns he himself created'.⁶⁵ A vivid symbol of this predicament is the astronaut himself, for he sets out on his heroic voyage of exploration cut off from the universe by the very scientific paraphernalia that makes it possible for him to explore it, 'imprisoned in his instrument-

⁶⁰ HC 248, 262–3, 268, 284–5, 322–3; 'The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man', *Between Past and Future* 278–9; Cf. 'The Archimedian Point', *Ingenor* (Spring 1969) 4–9, 24–6. ⁶¹ HC 230–2, 323; 'The Concept of History' 59.

⁶² HC 230–2, 238. ⁶³ HC 274.

⁶⁴ HC 261; 'The Archimedian Point' 24; 'The Conquest of Space' 277.

⁶⁵ HC 288.

ridden capsule where each actual physical encounter with his surroundings would spell immediate death'.⁶⁶

Arendt sees an analogy here with the attempts of philosophies like Marxism to find meaning in history. There seems to be no end to the rival patterns that can be found in history, and the rival stories that can be told. Like the scientists whose ingenuity eventually leaves them finding only their own constructions within nature, we project meanings into history in the course of looking for them. The sinister aspect of this, however, is that in history as in science, it is possible to *act* with devastating effectiveness on the basis of unproved theories. Scientists may not have realised their dream of stripping the veil from reality, but what they have undoubtedly learned to do is to act on the basis of their theories and to make them work in practice. The experience of totalitarianism, Arendt believed, showed that the same was true of history. For although the totalitarian ideologies that purported to provide the key to history were fictions, Hitler and Stalin showed that it is quite possible to act on the basis of a fictitious ideology and to set off processes that rival nuclear technology in their fearsomeness.⁶⁷

Whereas in Arendt's terms nuclear technology involves acting into nature, that is, starting new processes and importing into man's relations with nature an activity previously known only in human affairs, totalitarianism is a kind of mirror-image of this. In her interpretation, totalitarianism involves treating the human world as if it were a part of nature, in which power is to be had by discovering and acting in accordance with 'natural laws', the laws of race-war or class struggle.⁶⁸ Like modern technology, totalitarianism is animated by the belief that 'everything is possible' to those who understand the laws of nature. Nuclear physics and totalitarianism seemed to be alike in being stories of hubris overtaken by nemesis, of men who aimed at liberation and power and who succeeded only in unleashing natural or quasi-natural processes that would break down the limits needed to protect humanity. Arendt's reflections on Marx's contribution to totalitarianism were greatly affected, however, by her conviction that both alike were foreshadowed and eased by an earlier example of a process being unleashed to enslave men: what she thought of as the liberation of the 'life process'.⁶⁹ A look at this will help us to understand what she saw as the connection between Marx and totalitarianism.

⁶⁶ 'The Conquest of Space' 277.

⁶⁷ 'The Concept of History' 87-9. The stress here on an (exaggerated) parallel between totalitarianism and technology is Arendt's own.

⁶⁸ 'Ideology and Terror' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd edition (London, Allen and Unwin, 1967) 463-72.

⁶⁹ *HC* 47; 105-16.

Liberating the life process

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt attributes the rise of modern economic power and prosperity to a liberation of the 'life process' in which, as in the cases of nuclear technology and totalitarianism, power has produced impotence by leaving mankind at the mercy of uncontrollable forces. Her claim is, in brief, that mankind, like other animals, always has been subject to the necessities of biological nature, but that civilised men always struggled to free themselves from this as far as possible, and placed at the centre of their attention activities and interests that were fully human, not merely animal. Since the sixteenth century, however, in an unprecedented reversal of human priorities, Western men have increasingly focussed their attention and energies on serving the animal needs that were formerly kept out of sight in civilised society, and the resulting process of economic development has swept all before it. Marx, whose 'faithfulness . . . to phenomenal reality'⁷⁰ she praises, saw something of this, for he analysed the dynamics of capital and labour-power considered as entities which had escaped from the control of the human beings who generated them and taken on a life of their own, dominating their producers. There are echoes of this in Arendt's own account, except that she interprets alienation as the subordination of mankind to processes of biological necessity, processes which socialism merely accelerates.⁷¹

What set off this process was the modern transformation of 'property' into 'wealth' which Arendt had already found at the root of the imperialist expansion that had made totalitarianism possible. Her distinction here is a distinction between stability and process. By 'property' she means, as she claims pre-modern men also meant, a privately owned place in the common world, something stable, marked off from the property of others: a place to dwell in, not just to possess. 'Wealth', by contrast, is something insubstantial, not tied to any particular location, and its most characteristic form is capital, the function of which is to generate more wealth in an endless process. For our present purposes, the most significant distinction between them is precisely this process-character of wealth, contrasted with the limit-setting qualities of property. Arendt claims that before the modern age, the growth of wealth was actually kept in check by the existence of stable property, and that it was the massive expropriations following the

⁷⁰ HC 106.

⁷¹ HC 116. 'Alienation' to Arendt is alienation from the humanly constructed 'world' (see chapter 4 below). On the differences between Arendt's view and Marx's, see J. Ring, 'On Needing both Marx and Arendt: Alienation and the Flight from Inwardness', *Political Theory* 17/3 (August 1989) 432-48; R.S. Beiner, 'Hannah Arendt on Capitalism and Socialism', *Government and Opposition* 25/3 (Summer 1990) 359-70.

Reformation that broke down these human limits and released the forces that led to hitherto unheard-of wealth.⁷²

Besides capital, these same expropriations also released its complement, landless labour. When peasants were deprived of the property that had given them their place in the common world, and were reduced to day-labourers, they were, according to Arendt, transformed into embodiments of mere biological processes, not only subjected to 'the compelling urgency of life's necessity but . . . alienated from all cares and worries which did not immediately follow from the life process itself'.⁷³ In other words, like the totalitarians who subordinated themselves to the necessity of racial destiny or class struggle,⁷⁴ capitalists and labourers alike became servants of a process that was inhuman, the biological process of production and consumption that Arendt calls the 'life process'.

But if the growth of capitalism initiated this process, the rise of socialism consummated it. As long as human beings experience themselves and one another as distinct individuals, their appearance and disappearance in the world interrupts the process, but once mankind is 'socialized', experienced as a single entity with a collective 'species-life', the process can achieve its full momentum. 'Only when the reproduction of individual life is absorbed into the life process of man-kind, can the collective life process of a "socialized mankind" follow its own "necessity".'⁷⁵ Once human beings were actually serving this process rather than subordinating it to more specifically human goals it accelerated beyond its natural bounds, resulting in the enormous modern expansion in production. This had led in the contemporary world to a situation where automation expresses the blind, inhuman character of the production process, matched by the ever-increasing speed with which its products are consumed. The language Arendt uses to describe this echoes her analysis of totalitarianism, while alluding implicitly to the dangers of nuclear technology: 'It is as though we had forced open the distinguishing boundaries which protected the world, the human artifice, from nature, the biological process which goes on in its very midst . . .'⁷⁶

Arendt is suggesting, in other words, that totalitarianism, nuclear weapons and modern socio-economic development are all alike the manifestations of a kind of treason committed by modern men against human civilisation. Civilisation has always been precarious, a matter of wresting enough freedom from nature to build a human world, and guarding its ramparts against the natural forces that continually threatened

⁷² HC 61-71, 251-2; Cf. OTI 143-6. ⁷³ HC 255.

⁷⁴ 'Ideology and Terror' 462-72. ⁷⁵ HC 116, 321.

⁷⁶ HC 126. On the connection between modern weapons and the expansion of productive forces, see 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' 025(b).

to destroy it. But modern men have, as it were, gone over to the barbarians, and used their human capacity for action to side with the very forces that threaten civilisation, letting loose what Arendt, in a highly significant phrase, calls ‘an unnatural growth . . . of the natural’.⁷⁷ The human condition has always left man at the mercy of nature in the sense of being subject to nature’s cyclic processes of production and consumption, growth and decay, birth and death; but only in modern times have men released such natural processes from their cyclic repetition and let them loose on trajectories that are not cyclical but unlimited. Alike in nuclear technology, in totalitarianism and in ‘the life process of society’, Arendt sees forces which are not simply natural, however those involved may understand them, but that have been unleashed and enormously accelerated by human action.⁷⁸ Note that it is *action*, not labour or work, that is responsible for this: the capacity for starting new processes which would not otherwise exist, and whose outcome is always unpredictable. Arendt is quite explicit on this point.⁷⁹ The tragedy of Marx, in her view, is that although he aimed at freedom, which he misguidedly thought of as ‘making history’, what he actually achieved was to encourage his followers to put themselves at the service of compulsive processes.

The ambivalent tone of Arendt’s references to Marx has a great deal to do, then, with her conviction that he was on the one hand a particularly perceptive recorder of the trends of his time, but that on the other hand, because of the way in which he misinterpreted those trends, he did his best to encourage them instead of counteracting them. Marx’s genius, in her view, lay in his sensitivity to the compulsive process of economic development, the advent of the labouring classes in politics and the revaluation of labour and biological life within Western civilisation.⁸⁰ Where he was quite wrong, in her view, was in his estimation of what this meant for freedom and civilisation, and in not seeing the threat that it implied: and here, she thought, he was misled by the tradition of Western thought. For although, in his effort to respond to new experiences, he turned that tradition upside down,⁸¹ exalting the material activities that had formerly been despised, the conceptual apparatus he inherited was not sufficiently discriminating to enable him to recognise these new experiences for what they were.⁸² Because of his confusion between Labour, Work and

⁷⁷ HC 47; Cf. ‘Europe and the Atom Bomb’, *Commonweal* 60/24 (17 September 1954) 578; ‘The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism’ 8.

⁷⁸ HC 46–7, 126, 148–50; ‘Ideology and Terror’ 465–6. If Arendt had lived to see the development of biotechnology, it would no doubt have confirmed her fears.

⁷⁹ HC 232.

⁸⁰ ‘Karl Marx and the Tradition’ (2nd draft) section V, 22.

⁸¹ ‘Tradition and the Modern Age’ 17–40.

⁸² Cf. Arendt to Moe, 29 January 1953, Guggenheim Correspondence 012642.

Action, his efforts to achieve freedom only encouraged his followers to speed up the liberated life process.

As we follow Arendt's reflections on the totalitarian elements in Marxism, then, we can see how she became engaged in discriminating between different human activities and tracing historical changes in their standing: we can see, in other words, how she got from meditations on totalitarianism to *The Human Condition*. One point that must still be obscure to the reader, however, is the precise nature of the link between Marx and Stalinism. We have seen that, according to Arendt, Marx helped to 'liberate the life process' under the misapprehension that he was inaugurating the reign of freedom. But 'liberating the life process', even if we are prepared to go along with Arendt in seeing this as a threat to freedom and civilisation, is clearly not at all the same thing as unleashing the process of terror and death that Stalin let loose, and the two could even be seen as *opposites*.⁸³ It is easy enough to see the analogy between Arendt's descriptions of the two, since in each case she speaks of men being subjected to processes that pay no regard to human individuals or to the human world of civilisation, but the difference between them is literally a matter of life and death.

It is important to realise, therefore, that Arendt does not try to deny this difference. She does not equate Marxism with Stalinism or claim that there was any necessary connection from the former to the latter, any more than she had claimed that Nazism followed necessarily from nineteenth-century race theories. Far from any unity of theory and practice, there was, she believed, a gulf between Marx and Stalin bridged by contingent events.⁸⁴ By her account, indeed, the straightforward political implications of Marxism were stifling rather than catastrophic. In a fully 'socialized' future, the state would indeed wither away, leaving no politics, only the bureaucratic administration of the material concerns of a conformist herd of labourers. 'Bureaucracy is the body politic of a laboring society',⁸⁵ and while this would be oppressive because it amounts to 'rule by nobody' – that is, by nobody who can be called to account – it is not by any means necessarily lethal.

Marxism in Arendt's account is not itself totalitarian, then; what she does claim, however, is that it is possible with the wisdom of hindsight to see how easily it could breed totalitarian progeny in conditions of political crisis.

⁸³ Cf. S.J. Whitfield, *Into the Dark* 159.

⁸⁴ 'Tradition and the Modern Age' 26–7; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft, short MS) 3–6. Arendt's original project for the Marx book included sections on socialism and Bolshevism which would have indicated some of the steps by which Marxism was transformed into Stalinism. See 'Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism' 012650; Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 276–9.

⁸⁵ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section V, 32–3. Cf. *HC* 40–5.

One reason for this which we have already looked at in some detail is Marx's aim of 'making history' after discovering the laws of historical development, which was potentially lethal because it turned individual human beings into flotsam on the river of history or eggs in the revolutionary omelette. Two other implications of Marx's approach to history remain to be explored, however. In the first place, because of the view of legal and political structures implied by his theory of historical development, he helped to undermine the only barriers that might have been capable of resisting the totalitarian onslaught: in effect, he aided the forces of imperialism which (as we saw in *Totalitarianism*) were undermining the comparatively civilised political structures of the nation-state. Secondly, because he furthered the advent of a society composed of labourers, he unwittingly encouraged the predominance of the kind of human experience in which the seeds of totalitarianism most easily strike root. These two latter points, the first to do with political structures and the second to do with the relation of those structures to particular experiences, were subjects that occupied Arendt a great deal when she embarked upon her Marx book, and some of her reflections upon them are contained in highly concentrated form in the essay 'Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government', which she added to the later editions of *Totalitarianism*. Let us now explore this essay and its context.

'Ideology and Terror'

Arendt intended her essay on 'Ideology and Terror' to form chapter 4 of her Marx book, following a chapter on 'Law and Power', the 'two conceptual pillars of all traditional definitions of forms of government'. That third chapter was to end with a discussion of Montesquieu, in whose thought Arendt found 'the instruments of distinguishing totalitarianism from all – even the most tyrannical – governments of the past'.⁸⁶ Not that things were quite as straightforward as this quotation would suggest. As Arendt struggled with the problem of how to understand something that seemed to her quite unprecedented in terms of traditional categories, she also found herself questioning those categories themselves. We have seen how her attempt to pinpoint Marx's misapprehensions led her to question traditional understandings of human activity and to feel the need for finer discriminations, and something rather similar happened when she confronted the question of how to classify totalitarianism. Traditional classifications of political systems, such as the categories of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, had focussed on the question of who *rules*,

⁸⁶ Arendt to Moe, 29 January 1953, Guggenheim Correspondence 012642.

sometimes with the added refinement of asking whether or not that rule is exercised according to law. Once Arendt began to think about this, however, she quickly complicated life for herself and her readers by deciding not only that such categories were inadequate for describing the experiences of totalitarianism, but that in important respects they always *had* been inadequate for describing political experience. She found herself arguing that the focus on *rule* within the tradition of political thinking did not in fact reflect the fundamental experiences of action among plural men that lay at the root of the Western political tradition, but represented a distorted view of politics as seen from the point of view of philosophers from Plato onwards.⁸⁷

This proved to be a fruitful avenue, and it is one that we shall be exploring later in the book. For the present, however, we shall see that two aspects of Arendt's reflections on forms of government formed the context for her attempt in 'Ideology and Terror' to specify the distinctive quality of totalitarianism. One of them was Montesquieu's distinction between the 'nature' of a government and its 'principle'. According to Montesquieu, the difference between, say, a monarchy and a despotism was not simply a matter of structure, but lay also in the principles that animated the two and set their tone, 'fear' in the case of despotism, and 'honour' in the case of monarchy. Arendt was struck by Montesquieu's focus on the dynamic aspects of political systems, the way in which he connected particular forms of government with particular areas of human experience, and, as we shall see, her analysis of totalitarianism runs along similar lines.

Her second line of approach was by way of the traditional distinction between lawful and lawless governments. Inevitably, this too set her off on reflections about the different concepts of law to be found within the Western tradition,⁸⁸ and to these also we shall have occasion to return. For the present, however, the relevant point is that until the advent of proto-totalitarian ways of thought, laws had always been understood as restrictions placed in the way of action. Laws were boundaries, fences, hedges, meant to guard men from one another and to limit the disruption caused by their anarchic ability to act. Laws were part of the stable structure of civilisation against whose walls the tides of barbarism continually thundered. Within this context, let us now turn to her elaboration of the contention that terror is the essence of totalitarian government and ideology its substitute for a principle of action.

⁸⁷ Arendt's reflections can be followed in her manuscripts from about 1952–4, e.g. 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (two versions), Box 69; 'The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism', Box 68; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (two drafts), Box 64; 'Philosophy and Politics', Box 69.

⁸⁸ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) sections III–IV; *OR* 186–90.

Arendt's first concern in 'Ideology and Terror' is to distinguish totalitarianism from tyranny. It is under that familiar heading that we are tempted to classify Nazism and Stalinism,⁸⁹ but according to Arendt this is a mistake. The essence of tyranny is lawless, arbitrary power wielded by a ruler in his own interest, and the principle of action in such a system is fear. But totalitarianism is another thing altogether: it is a kind of rule that is not arbitrary, not in anyone's interests (not even the ruler's), not even lawless, and in which terror is no longer just an ancillary principle of action but is the essence of the system. It is a system that has no concern for individual human beings at all, but uses them merely as material for the working of supposedly suprahuman 'laws' of nature or history.

Arendt discusses the relation between totalitarianism and law in a long passage which is central to her theory. Traditionally, she says, it has been assumed that lawlessness and arbitrary use of power were the marks of tyranny, while it was characteristic of legitimate government to operate within the restraints of law. But totalitarianism explodes this distinction, for although its rulers have no respect for ordinary laws of the kind that protect individual rights, they do not enjoy the arbitrary power of the traditional tyrant. Instead, they act in accordance with what they suppose to be the overriding laws of nature or history, doing their best to make human beings embody and exemplify these laws as much as non-human species do.

Ordinary laws, of the kind that ordinary tyrants break, are essentially boundaries designed to establish a stable common world for human beings to inhabit, and to protect its stability against the restless actions of ever-changing men. But in contrast to this humanist understanding of laws as fences to limit and protect the spontaneous movements of individual men, totalitarians understand their supra-human 'laws' as laws of movement, the endless movement of race war or class struggles in which individuals are submerged. Terror is essential to this endless movement, partly as the means whereby each new 'inferior race' or 'dying class' is eliminated and the process carried into effect, but also because it eliminates the human spontaneity that might otherwise stand in the way of these 'laws of nature', and reduces individuals to members of a species who can do nothing but follow their natural or historic role:

Terror is the realization of the law of movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action. As such, terror seeks to 'stabilize' men in order to liberate the forces of nature or history.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ For an interesting discussion of parallels with the Zulu king, Shaka, see J.L. Stanley, 'Is Totalitarianism a new Phenomenon? Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Origins of Totalitarianism', *Review of Politics* 49/2 (Spring 1987) 177-207.

⁹⁰ 'Ideology and Terror' 465.

Arendt claims that in totalitarian regimes even the rulers do not act freely, but only execute what they suppose to be natural or historical laws. It is true that in the early stages of their rule they must behave like ordinary tyrants to the extent of levelling the fences of human law that protect rights and 'the living space of freedom'. Having done so, however, instead of leaving individuals in the 'lawless, fenceless wilderness of fear and suspicion' characteristic of tyranny, in which, in spite of everything, *some* room for movement is left, totalitarian terror does its best to eradicate individuality altogether and to bind men together in such a way that no space for individual action remains. Total terror binds men with 'a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions'.⁹¹ The point of this is to enable inevitable natural or historical processes to proceed even more smoothly and swiftly than they would do of themselves, unhindered by the arbitrary aberrations of individuals.

In the iron band of terror, which destroys the plurality of men and makes out of man the One who unfailingly will act as though he himself were part of the course of history or nature, a device has been found not only to liberate the historical and natural forces, but to accelerate them to a speed they never would reach if left to themselves.⁹²

In this last quotation it is easy to hear the echoes of Arendt's reflections on modern scientists who endanger humanity by liberating natural processes, and on those, including Marx, who have 'liberated the life process' of a unified, socialised man. She does not accuse Marx himself of unleashing terror, merely of making it much easier for Stalin to do so. One of the ways in which he had facilitated this was his devaluation of political structures and laws which were in any case under attack as a result of the implications of capitalist imperialism. In her manuscript lectures on Marx, Arendt remarks that since he understood rulership simply as tyranny by a dominant class which tries to hang on to power and resist the rise of the next progressive class, even government becomes merely an impediment to the process of production. As for law, in her view Marx was quite lacking in any conception of law as a stabilizing structure setting limits to action.⁹³

According to Montesquieu's classic account, each form of government needs not only an essential structure, but also a principle of action to inspire government and subjects. But totalitarianism is not a stable structure at all but an unrelenting process of movement, and the terror at its heart both animates it and provides its form. Arendt therefore says that a 'perfect' totalitarian regime would need nothing but terror to stay in motion.⁹⁴ Any

⁹¹ 'Ideology and Terror' 465–6; Cf. Arendt to Jaspers, 4 March 1951, *Briefwechsel* 202.

⁹² 'Ideology and Terror' 466.

⁹³ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section IV, 12–13.

⁹⁴ 'Ideology and Terror' 467.

regime that has not actually achieved global rule is not yet in that position; not that it needs a principle of *action*, since the elimination of spontaneity under totalitarianism makes free action even in support of the regime irrelevant. Caught up in the inhuman process of nature or history, in which they may at any time find themselves either victims or executors of its 'laws', what the inhabitants of totalitarian countries need, says Arendt, is an insight into this process itself. This insight is provided by ideology.

In spite of the title of her essay, which appears to give precedence to 'Ideology',⁹⁵ Arendt makes clear that it is terror that is essential to totalitarianism, whereas ideology in any more elaborate form than the surrender to inhuman forces is ancillary and may even be dispensable. Ideologies, those all-embracing deductive systems which give their adherents the satisfaction of believing that everything can be explained, were, she says, politically insignificant until Hitler and Stalin discovered their totalitarian potentialities. These lie not in any specific content but in the *form* of ideologies, which claim to be scientific guides to history, and treat events as though they followed necessarily in a logical chain. Arendt identifies three connected elements in ideological thinking that turned out to be potentially totalitarian. In the first place, because of their ambition to explain everything, ideologies are oriented toward history and preoccupied with change and motion rather than with what actually exists. Secondly, their focus on the hidden processes underlying change makes it difficult for their adherents to pay serious attention to present, experienced reality. Finally, this 'emancipation of thought from experience'⁹⁶ takes the form of concentrating on logical deductions from the ideology's central idea. This logical chain, which is supposed to reveal the consistent process of history, so fascinates the believer as to shut his eyes and ears against what is actually happening in the world.

Arendt's argument is that this insulation against reality and experience always was inherent in ideological thinking, and that the momentous step taken by Hitler and Stalin was simply to take it seriously. Ideologies could be transformed into weapons of totalitarian terror simply by insisting on logical consistency and driving the implications of the ideology to the furthest and most preposterous conclusions. What mattered to Hitler and Stalin, in other words, was not the intellectual substance of their ideologies but their compulsive form. What each was committed to was the service of

⁹⁵ Probably in implicit contrast to Robespierre's account of revolutionary dictatorship as based on 'virtue and terror' (itself, presumably, an allusion to Montesquieu's 'principles' of republics on the one hand and despotisms on the other). Arendt read Robespierre's speeches while writing *Totalitarianism* (OT1 295). Cf. M. Canovan, 'Hannah Arendt on Ideology in Totalitarianism' in N. O'Sullivan, *The Structure of Modern Ideology* (Aldershot, Edward Elgar, 1989) 151–71.

⁹⁶ 'Ideology and Terror' 471.

necessity. Stalin was not interested in the welfare of the working class, nor Hitler in the German *Volks*, but both were spell-bound by self-contained deductive systems within which struggle, domination and terror proceeded by implacable logic. Similarly, subjects who accepted such a deductive system were perfectly conditioned to be either victims or executioners, as either role happened to follow from the premises they had accepted.

Reflecting upon the spectacle of old Bolsheviks confessing to crimes they had not committed rather than abandon their ideology, Arendt claims that the totalitarian project of turning human beings into robots obeying the laws of nature or history finds an ally inside men's minds in 'our fear of contradicting ourselves'. 'The tyranny of logicity' is 'the compulsion with which we can compel ourselves',⁹⁷ allowing our thoughts and decisions to be dictated by what we have already accepted instead of exercising the human capacity to start afresh, to have new ideas, to look at things again, to learn from experience. The strait-jacket of ideological logic is an internal policeman complementing the external terror of the camps and reducing human beings to subhuman material for supposedly suprahuman forces.⁹⁸ The ideal subject of a totalitarian regime, therefore, is not someone who has thought about his experience and decided that the official ideology fits the facts, but a robot-like being who is incapable either of experience or of thought.

In terms of the classificatory apparatus she drew from Montesquieu, then, Arendt characterised totalitarianism as a new kind of political system with terror as its essence and ideology in place of a principle of action. According to her reading of Montesquieu, however, the 'principles' he attributes to different forms of government correspond to the different aspects of political experience on which each form is built.⁹⁹ She therefore goes on to ask what kind of human experience can underlie totalitarianism and make it possible. Her solution is loneliness, the loneliness of uprooted masses and labourers absorbed in their own material needs.

Following her usual practice, Arendt takes the everyday term 'loneliness' and gives it a special sense, carefully distinguishing it from near-synonyms. For a start, 'loneliness' in her sense is not equivalent to 'isolation', the severing of political ties between individuals on which tyrants have always relied to prevent challenges to their power. People who are isolated in the sense of being unable to act together in politics may nevertheless preserve the rest of their lives intact, and indeed if such a person is an artist or a

⁹⁷ 'Ideology and Terror' 473. Cf. 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS) 19–23. Arendt's reflections on totalitarian logicity were bound up with her long meditation on the affinities between philosophy and tyranny: see chapter 7 below.

⁹⁸ 'Ideology and Terror' 473.

⁹⁹ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) sections III, 33, IV, 1; 'The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism' 4. Cf. chapter 6 below.

craftsman he may actually choose isolation in order to be alone with his work of adding new objects to the human world.

The crucial point here is that 'loneliness' as Arendt understands it is more than lack of human relationships. She means by it not only separation from other people, but also and especially separation from a human *world* inhabited in common with other people, and therefore loss of a sense of reality and ability to make sound judgements about experience. We shall have a lot more to say about Arendt's theory of 'the world' in the chapter on *The Human Condition*, but we need to be aware that 'loneliness' here means deprivation not only of an emotional but of an ontological and epistemological kind, separation from human experience of reality as well as lack of community and consolation. This loneliness, 'the experience of not belonging to the world at all',¹⁰⁰ is, says Arendt, connected with the condition of modern masses in the wake of the industrial revolution and the political crises of the twentieth century.

True to her customary pattern of three-fold distinctions, Arendt distinguishes 'loneliness' not only from 'isolation' but also from 'solitude', the withdrawal from the world of men which is a necessary preliminary for the inner dialogue of thought, and about which she would say a great deal more in *The Life of the Mind*. Solitude, being alone with oneself, still needs periodic contact with the world of men if it is not to turn into loneliness, a condition in which neither genuine thought nor reliable experience is possible. The one capacity a person is left with in this state is the capacity for deductive reasoning of an automatic, computer-like kind. Quoting Luther, according to whom a lonely man 'always deduces one thing from the other and thinks everything to the worst', Arendt suggests that it was the mass experience of loneliness that prepared people to accept totalitarian ideologies, making it possible for them to be mobilised in a way that the isolated subjects of traditional tyrannies never could be. Compared with the desert of tyranny, 'it seems as if a way had been found to set the desert itself in motion, to let loose a sand storm that could cover all parts of the inhabited earth'.¹⁰¹

Arendt's reflections on 'loneliness' in the essay on 'Ideology and Terror' illustrate the way in which, as she continued to think about totalitarianism, and particularly about its Marxist antecedents, her thought trains widened out to encompass the subjects that would preoccupy her in *The Human Condition*. For while her stress on the loneliness of people who no longer belong to the human world is a direct continuation of the themes of *Totalitarianism*, in which she identified uprooted 'masses' as the followers of totalitarian movements, and presented totalitarianism as a kind of new

¹⁰⁰ 'Ideology and Terror' 475.

¹⁰¹ 'Ideology and Terror' 477–8.

barbarism assailing the ramparts of civilisation, there is a new element in her analysis that is directly linked to her work on Marx. This is her suggestion that people in modern times may be particularly vulnerable to 'loneliness', and therefore to totalitarianism, because of a gradual shift in the balance of human activities as a result of which 'all human activities have been transformed into laboring'.¹⁰² Labour (as she would go on to explain in *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*) simultaneously locks each individual up inside his own private experience of material life, and turns the mass of individuals into 'socialized man', a species that behaves as one. In combination, these characteristics make labourers ideal subjects for totalitarianism.

Arendt's further investigations of the roots of totalitarianism therefore led her to the conclusion that those roots went even deeper than her original enquiry had suggested. As long as her main focus was Nazism, she could stress the 'subterranean currents' in European history out of which the horrors of the twentieth century had emerged. But when she transferred her attention to Marxist totalitarianism, the currents flowing in the direction of the new barbarism seemed much nearer the surface. The concern with the growth and expansion of capitalism which figured in *Totalitarianism* as a key 'element' deepened into an account of the 'liberation of the life process', which might have been set off by capitalism, but which was carried further by the emancipation of the labouring classes and consummated by socialism. The significance of Marx, she concluded, was that he had detected these currents and had misguidedly helped them on their way. He had articulated changes in the balance of human activities that had elevated material life to an unprecedented dignity while leading people to experience history as the flow of an inexorable process. But, misled by the inherited concepts he was vainly trying to turn upside-down, he had encouraged these changes under the entirely utopian misapprehension that beyond them lay the realm of freedom.

This analysis left Arendt with a new agenda, still tied to the effort to face up to totalitarianism, although, as she conceded, these investigations 'may seem to have taken me far afield'.¹⁰³ On the one hand, there were problems to do with traditional political philosophy, since (unlike Nazism) Stalinism really did seem to have been facilitated by certain deeply ingrained habits of thought. Why was the conceptual apparatus Marx inherited so misleading? What sort of categories *were* needed to clarify the developments by which the modern world had become vulnerable to totalitarianism? On the other hand, there were more practical problems of political orientation. If the elements of totalitarianism included not only capitalism but *labour*, then an

¹⁰² 'Ideology and Terror' 475.

¹⁰³ Arendt to Moe, 29 January 1953, Guggenheim Correspondence 012642.

appropriate response would have to go beyond reasserting the *citoyen* against the *bourgeois*, and would have to raise painful questions about the compatibility of freedom and equality, and whether (in the characteristic radical nightmare of the mid-twentieth century) compassion for the oppressed might trick one into fighting on the wrong side. These questions led Arendt to the investigations that surfaced in *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*. Before we go on to look at the first of these, however, we need to raise another question. As we have seen, one of the main strands in Arendt's thinking is a dramatic account of the coming of modernity, held together by metaphors between totalitarianism, atomic reactions, revolutions and the 'life process'. What is the status of this story?

On storytelling

The story told by Arendt about the sources of the modern human predicament recalls many other such stories told by intellectuals ever since Hegel set the fashion, particularly those that portray modernisation as a Fall and are less optimistic than Marxism about the prospects of redemption. It might indeed be maintained that Arendt was working out her own variation on what Paul Connerton calls 'the characteristic topos of German sociology: the thesis of heteronomy', according to which the network of institutions characteristic of capitalist industrialisation 'assumed a dynamism which was hardly . . . susceptible to human control', and which frustrated the intentions that originally lay behind it.¹⁰⁴ What concerns us here, however, is not the possible affinities between Arendt's story and those offered by Heidegger or Horkheimer or Voegelin or anyone else, but her purpose in telling it. What did she think that she was doing in telling this story? Are we to suppose that she thought she was writing history in the sense in which Hegel and Marx thought they were, that is, providing the one true key to the mysteries of the past?

Hardly. We have seen that she was well aware of the ease with which alternative patterns can be 'discovered' in history, each of them imposed by the discoverer,¹⁰⁵ and that she had traced the origins of totalitarian ideologies precisely to fictions of this kind. In view of her scepticism about other people's attempts to find meaning in history, however, what are we to make of her own account?

The first point we need to make here is that looking back at modernization and finding in it a story to be told is not the same thing as putting forward a full-blown philosophy of history. The essential claim

¹⁰⁴ P. Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment – an Essay on the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980) 120.

¹⁰⁵ 'The Concept of History' 80–90; 'Religion and Politics' 118.

implicit in, for example, Marx's theory is that 'history' is a single process stretching back into the past and forward into the future, and this is precisely what Arendt denied. She was particularly concerned to oppose the notion that the future is simply a continuation of the past, so that one can make predictions by identifying trends or patterns. One of her most characteristic doctrines was the observation, many times repeated, that because human beings have the capacity to act and make a new beginning, the future is in principle unpredictable. In any case, it is only from the point of view of the historian, looking back from the vantage-point of the present, that 'the chaotic maze of past happenings'¹⁰⁶ turns into a coherent story at all. Looking back, we may have the illusion that things could not have been otherwise, but when we turn to the present and the unknown future, what becomes apparent is not only our ability to choose between possibilities inherited from the past, but also our capacity to call into existence possibilities that have never before been imagined.

We can be sure, therefore, that Arendt did not hold anything like a philosophy of history in the classic sense. The past in general, let alone the future, did not, in her view, have any specific form. What she evidently *did* believe, however, was that certain features of Western experience during the last few centuries could be seen, from the vantage-point of the mid-twentieth century, to form a coherent story. The explosion of production and consumption gave this period a characteristic and unique shape quite unlike the ordinary jumble of acts and events about which earlier historians had told their stories. It was precisely the experience of this overwhelming change that led thinkers like Marx to expect that human history as a whole would present a similar pattern. But in Arendt's view, the pattern of modernisation was a pattern *uncharacteristic* of human history. It is when men deliberately choose to behave like part of nature by giving priority to their capacity for labour that their activities become regular and predictable.¹⁰⁷

Where the 'liberation of the life process' is concerned, therefore, we need not suppose that Arendt was inconsistent in denying the basis for philosophies of history but believing that an objective pattern could be found in the recent Western past. This is not the end of the matter, though, for, as we have seen, her account of this development was heavily metaphorical, linking economic growth with totalitarianism and runaway science into a dramatic story of modernity. And I think it may help us here to remember that her sceptical attitude toward historical patterns was complemented by an enthusiasm for storytelling.

Several of her commentators have written perceptively about her belief

¹⁰⁶ 'Understanding and Politics' 388.

¹⁰⁷ HC 42-5.

that we can grasp experience more adequately through stories than through the more conventional methods of social science.¹⁰⁸ The emphasis in these discussions, however, has tended to fall on stories about concrete events and specific individuals, following Arendt's observation that 'every individual life . . . can eventually be told as a story', making history itself 'the storybook of mankind'.¹⁰⁹ As far as I am aware, attention has not been paid to the story of modernity as the 'unnatural growth of the natural' with which we are concerned here. This story is very different from a story about a particular individual. All the same, I suspect that we may get some clue to what Arendt was up to by recalling the affirmation in her essay on Isak Dinesen that storytelling 'reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it' and 'brings about consent and reconciliation with things as they really are'.¹¹⁰

If her story of modernity is indeed intended to reveal meaning rather than to find the one true pattern in history, what is the meaning it reveals? There are, I think, two aspects to this. In the first place, the story is intended to make explicit the metaphors that dominate the self-understanding of modern humanity. Secondly, it is a story with a moral, and is indeed intended to bring about 'consent and reconciliation with things as they really are': reconciliation not with a supposed historical destiny, but with the human condition.

As her critics have frequently pointed out, Arendt relies on metaphors in telling her story of the modern Fall of Man. The uncontrollable process of an atomic chain-reaction, 'natural' in a sense, but also 'unnatural', since it would never have occurred without human action, lurks metaphorically behind those other quasi-natural and unstoppable processes in terms of which she portrays totalitarian terror, economic development (the 'life process of mankind'), and the degeneration of revolutions.¹¹¹ It would be a mistake to suppose, however, that what she is doing is merely arbitrary, and that she is imposing the metaphor of 'process' on the real world. Her method is rather to meditate upon and bring into the light of consciousness a metaphor that is deeply embedded in modern thinking and that strongly influences the way we experience the world. Like a literary critic drawing attention to the images implicit in a poem, she reflects upon modern modes of experience and the images in which they are cast.

¹⁰⁸ D. Luban, 'Explaining Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Theory', *Social Research* 50/1 (Spring 1983) 215–48; M.A. Hill, 'The Fictions of Mankind and the Stories of Men' in Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt* 275–300; S. Benhabib, 'Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative', *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990) 167–96.

¹⁰⁹ *HC* 184.

¹¹⁰ 'Isak Dinesen 1885–1963', *Men in Dark Times* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970) 105. Cf. 'Action and the "Pursuit of Happiness"' in *Politische Ordnung und menschliche Existenz: Festgabe für Eric Voegelin* (Munich, Beck, 1962) 2–5, 10.

¹¹¹ e.g. 'Philosophy and Politics' 023376; 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' 1–5.

This is particularly obvious in the case of her interpretation of the French Revolution in *On Revolution*, where, as she points out, 'the various metaphors in which the revolution is seen not as the work of men but as an irresistible process, the metaphors of stream and torrent and current, were . . . coined by the actors themselves'.¹¹² Clearly, those who lived through the Revolution saw it as a natural process taking its irresistible course, and passed on to their successors an understanding of revolution framed in those terms. In her interpretation of totalitarianism, also, Arendt finds in the self-understanding of the totalitarians themselves and of those whom she sees as their pre-totalitarian forerunners a similar image of being carried along by irresistible processes.¹¹³ The metaphor of the 'life process', too, which she puts at the heart of her account of modern economic growth, is one that she does not import but that she finds in the language resorted to by the theorists of capitalist society from Locke to Marx.¹¹⁴

One might perhaps say, therefore, that Arendt is in a sense trying to do for modern Western mankind something similar to what she did when she set out to tell the story of Rahel Varnhagen 'as she herself might have told it'.¹¹⁵ In so doing, she does reveal meanings of which we are ordinarily unaware, though at the price (as we shall see later) of presenting an image of 'society' that is systematically misleading about certain features of modern politics. But the reason why she reiterated her story of modernity was, I believe, that it is a story with a moral: a moral of some complexity. The point of the story is to make us aware of the human predicament by bringing to our attention the images in terms of which we tend to experience the world and tracing those images back to fundamental human experiences. For underlying these all-pervasive modern metaphors of irresistible processes, Arendt finds two basic human experiences. One of them is the intimate experience of being subjected to necessity, which we all share simply by having bodies. Physically, our subjection to inevitable processes is not metaphor, but actual fact.¹¹⁶ This experience of the urgency of bodily functions, however, is an experience of repetitive, cyclic functioning. To find the fundamental experience at the root of images of irresistible *linear* processes with unpredictable ends, we have to turn to our experiences of action, of starting things that we cannot stop.¹¹⁷

What the story reveals, in other words, is a lesson about the potentialities and limits of action. Although always in some degree subject to nature's necessity, human beings have the capacity to break out of nature's endless

¹¹² OR 49. ¹¹³ OTI 215–20; 'Ideology and Terror' 465–8.

¹¹⁴ HC 99, 105–6. She was certainly aware of the *dangers* of building a doctrine on a metaphor. See 'On Violence' in *Crises of the Republic* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972) 128.

¹¹⁵ *Rahel Varnhagen: the Life of a Jewish Woman* (San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) xv. ¹¹⁶ OR 59. ¹¹⁷ HC 232.

round and to start new things: the trouble is that this action itself sets off uncontrollable processes. The story therefore carries a double moral. On the one hand, it is the tragic background against which Arendt insists that we can vindicate human pride by not surrendering to overwhelming forces, but taking heroic action even in the most hopeless circumstances.¹¹⁸ Simultaneously, however, it is a reminder of the dangers of hubris and of the need for limits. To find out more about Arendt's assessment of the possibilities and dangers of the human predicament, it is time to turn to *The Human Condition*.

¹¹⁸ Cf. chapter 6 below.

4 *The Human Condition*

Although *Totalitarianism* has been perhaps the most widely read of Hannah Arendt's books (while *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is certainly the most notorious) it is *The Human Condition* that has attracted most scholarly attention. Generally regarded as her *magnum opus*,¹ it has been the subject of a good deal of analysis and criticism. It would be neither appropriate nor feasible to attempt a full-scale commentary on the book here. Instead, what I shall try to do in this chapter is to situate it within the context of Arendt's work, and in particular to relate it to the thought trains set off by her encounter with totalitarianism. For the reason why we have spent so long tracing her path from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *The Human Condition* is that only within that context can one properly understand the later book. Following Arendt's thought trains will lead us to take a fresh look at a number of areas, of which the most interesting will perhaps be her theory of action.

Some readers may be sceptical about this approach, and dubious in particular about the hermeneutic principles involved in making use of material Arendt chose not to publish in order to interpret what she did explicitly offer to the world. Such a reader might object that where a writer publishes a systematic work of political philosophy, we must suppose that the work as published represents her definitive position and should be taken as it stands. Precisely because there is some force in this argument (although we would think it odd when interpreting Marx or Locke to ignore unpublished writings and to assume as a matter of principle that they could not shed light on the theorist's major works) it is important to realise that Arendt did *not* present *The Human Condition* as a systematic statement of her political philosophy, a kind of Arendtian equivalent of Rawls' *Theory of Justice*. To suppose that she did so is to make assumptions about her intentions, assumptions which are contradicted by her own statements. In her view, it turns out, the book was a less complete, more contingent work than readers often suspect, concerned not so much with politics as with the

¹ A view I shared when writing my earlier book on Arendt.

predicament from which politics must start. It is therefore not quite the political treatise it is often taken for. This is a claim that needs expansion and substantiation.

The Human Condition, published in 1958, was a revised version of a series of lectures which Arendt had given in the spring of 1956 at the University of Chicago. Like the other courses of lectures she produced round about the same time, most of them unpublished, these represent part of the interconnected web of thought that she worked out in the 1950s, which started from her reflections on totalitarianism and Marxism but expanded far beyond the bounds of her intended book on Marx and turned into an attempt to rethink political theory. In some ways *The Human Condition* represents a kind of cross-section cut through this process of thought. On the one hand, it follows directly from her investigation of the totalitarian elements in Marxism. On the other hand, it points beyond itself to a systematic work of more specifically political theory that she planned at this time but did not complete.

By the time she wrote it her investigations of Marxism had led her so far afield that she had given up the idea of writing a book specifically on Marx.² One of the things she was planning instead was a book tentatively entitled *Introduction into Politics*, evidently intended to be something more like the kind of systematic statement of her political theory that *The Human Condition* is often taken to be. This was to have involved 'a critical re-examination of the chief traditional concepts and conceptual frameworks of political thinking – such as, means and end; authority; government; power; law; war; etc.', plus 'a more systematic examination of those spheres of the world and human life which we properly call political, that is, of the public realm on one hand, and of action on the other'. These quotations are taken from a research proposal Arendt submitted to the Rockefeller Foundation after the publication of *The Human Condition*. She explained there that she had had this project in mind for some time, but that since 'the central political human activity is action . . . in order to arrive at an adequate understanding . . . it proved necessary to separate action conceptually from other human activities with which it is usually confounded, such as labor and work'. She had therefore dealt with these matters first in *The Human Condition*, which 'is a kind of prolegomena to the book which I now intend to write. It will continue where the other book ends.'³ Although Arendt had been engaged on *Introduction into Politics*

² Arendt to Thompson, 7 April 1956, Correspondence with the Rockefeller Foundation, MSS Box 20 013889.

³ 'Description of Proposal', Rockefeller Correspondence 013872, almost certainly from 1959. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (*Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982) 519, n. 118) assigns it to 1956, but this is impossible, since the document refers to work published in 1958. The book was to have examined 'the various

since 1955, the book, like that on Marx, was never completed. First she was drawn aside by the events and commitments that led her to write *On Revolution*⁴ (into which a good deal of her proposed material found its way), and then in 1960 the capture and prospective trial of Adolf Eichmann caused her to rearrange her commitments and to embark upon a controversy that would absorb her energy for years.⁵ As a result we do not in fact have a single, systematic statement of her mature political theory, although it can be reconstructed from the mass of her work, published and unpublished.

The first point to bear in mind, then, is that Arendt herself did not regard *The Human Condition* as the definitive statement of her political theory, but rather as a kind of preliminary to political theory proper, an investigation of the human activities that have most bearing upon politics and have been most misunderstood. As we saw, she had decided that the Marxist contribution to totalitarianism owed a great deal to a distorted understanding of the human activities that are relevant to politics and that need to be distinguished as Labour, Work and Action, and had come to the conclusion that one source of this distortion was the great tradition of Western political philosophy coming down from Plato. Marx's heroic attempt to articulate the trends of his time had taken a wrong turning partly because the conceptual framework he inherited and rebelled against pushed him in certain directions that took him away from an adequate understanding of political experience. For it seemed to Arendt that although the great tradition had in some respects faithfully handed down the accumulated wisdom of generations, where politics was concerned it had distorted or suppressed aspects of experience.⁶ Without concepts through which to articulate this, human beings find it very hard even to remember what they

modi of human plurality and the institutions which correspond to them. In other words, I shall undertake a re-examination of the old question of forms of government, their principles and their modes of action. In terms of human plurality, there exist two basic modes of being together; to be together with other men and with one's equals from which springs action, and to be together with one's self to which the activity of thinking corresponds. Hence, the book should end with a discussion of the relationship between acting and thinking or between politics and philosophy.' Arendt had been working intermittently since 1955 on the book, which was intended for the German publisher Piper, and it is clear that its proposed concerns arose out of the same body of interconnected reflections on Marx and totalitarianism that gave birth to *The Human Condition*, and that can be best observed in their complexity in Arendt's 1953 lectures on 'Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Thought' (2nd draft) MSS Box 64.

⁴ In which she became involved as a result of an invitation to lecture in the Department of American History and Civilisation at Princeton in 1959 (Arendt to Jaspers, 17 January 1958, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel*, ed. L. Köhler and H. Saner (Munich, Piper, 1985) 377; see also 393, 406, 411).

⁵ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 328-9.

⁶ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) 'Preface' 05, section II 9-19.

have done and suffered, let alone to think coherently about it,⁷ and as a result vital areas of political experience had remained uncharted as long as the tradition retained its authority. Only in the twentieth century, after the comprehensive collapse of any such intellectual authority, had it become possible to escape traditional distortions and rethink political concepts.⁸

One of the chief objects of *The Human Condition* was, therefore, as Bhikhu Parekh argues,⁹ to provide a more satisfactory phenomenology of the human activities that are relevant to politics. But although it is certainly fruitful to read *The Human Condition* in this way, two qualifications need to be borne in mind. In the first place, although readers have tried to find in the book political stances and proposals, it is not really concerned with politics as such, rather with fundamental human activities that bear upon politics. As we shall see later, this is a point that is particularly crucial for the interpretation of Arendt's theory of action. Secondly, we need to be aware of the context of what Parekh calls Arendt's 'intense dissatisfaction with the Western tradition of political philosophy',¹⁰ because the thought trains that led her to this dissatisfaction continue through *The Human Condition* and beyond. As we saw in the previous chapter, she related Marx's misunderstanding of politics not only to the traditional concepts which he inherited but also to modern developments: to what she interpreted as a liberation of the 'life process', part of a more general 'unnatural growth of the natural' that reached its climax in the barbarism of the totalitarian regimes. In other words, her critique of Marxism was linked with her own story of modernity.

The implication of this is that her account of human activities in *The Human Condition* cannot be seen simply as an attempt to replace misleading theory with authentic phenomenology. Truly phenomenological investigation would leave aside all theoretical presuppositions in order to respond faithfully to experience as it presents itself, whereas Arendt's phenomenology is enclosed within theoretical commitments arising out of her reflections on totalitarianism and modernity as well as on the limitations of philosophy. Her account of the human condition is part of the web of thought she was spinning, and the categories she elaborates in *The Human Condition* are shaped as much by the needs of that web as by her considerable sensitivity to previously unrecorded experience. In particular, we shall see that it is because some of her categories, notably 'labour' and

⁷ 'Preface: the Gap Between Past and Future', *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Viking Press, 1968) 6; *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973) 129, 131. This edition is referred to below as *OR*.

⁸ 'Tradition and the Modern Age', *Between Past and Future* 28. Cf. 'Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought' (1954) MSS Box 56 023248-61.

⁹ B. Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 1981) 68-9. ¹⁰ Parekh, *Hannah Arendt* 1.

'society', are so strongly moulded by her interpretation of totalitarianism and modernity that they are markedly unpersuasive outside that theoretical context.

This means that the main themes of *The Human Condition* follow directly from the trains of thought that we have seen her developing out of her reflections on totalitarianism. For example, just as totalitarian terror, in her view, strips human beings of their plurality and spontaneity in order to reduce them to an animal species, so she argues in *The Human Condition* that as labouring values have risen to prominence, something very similar has been happening painlessly in all modern societies, for 'the *animal laborans* is indeed only one . . . of the animal species which populate the earth'.¹¹ Similarly, her account of how the structure of human civilisation had succumbed to totalitarians who were prepared to side with inhuman forces continues in *The Human Condition* with her claim that the human world erected by work is being destroyed by an 'unnatural growth of the natural'. Finally, following her analysis of totalitarianism as a combination of slavish determinism with hubristic notions that 'everything is possible', she is concerned in *The Human Condition* to celebrate the possibility of unpredictable action on the one hand and to warn of its limitations and dangers on the other. For one of the main purposes of her analysis is to remind her contemporaries of the human predicament, the 'conditions under which life on earth has been given to man'.¹² As she had observed in *Totalitarianism*, modern men want to remake everything and resent the idea that anything is simply given.¹³ In totalitarianism, but also in nuclear physics and in the economic revolution following the liberation of the 'life process', modern men could be seen setting out to take control of their lives in the belief that everything is possible, and finding that the penalty for hubris is enslavement to the pseudo-natural processes their actions let loose.

Faced with experiences of this kind, Arendt's aim was to remind people of the limits of the human condition as well as of its possibilities.¹⁴ She wished to draw attention to two errors which might seem to cancel one another out, but which she found conjoined in totalitarianism and its analogues: on the one hand the belief that everything is possible, and on the other the belief that everything is determined within an inevitable process. One side of *The Human Condition* is of course her celebration of the human capacity to *act*, to make new beginnings instead of being determined by what has gone before: but the other side, equally important, is her sense

¹¹ *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958) 84. (This edition is referred to below as *HC*.) ¹² *HC* 7.

¹³ *The Burden of Our Time* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1951) 434, Cf. 435, 438, 296-7. (This edition is referred to below as *OT1*.)

¹⁴ 'The Archimedean Point', *Ingenor* (Spring 1969) 25-6.

(summed up particularly clearly in a later essay) that the life of action, 'its greatness notwithstanding . . . is limited by those things which men cannot change at will. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises.'¹⁵

Her statement that life is 'given' to us upon conditions has a religious flavour which reminds us that her earliest intellectual enthusiasm was for Kierkegaard, that she wrote her first book on St Augustine, and that after the Holocaust she told a Jewish friend that she had never doubted the existence of God.¹⁶ Her religion, whatever it was, remained strictly a private matter, showing itself only in an occasional telling aside in her writings,¹⁷ but it is manifest in her thinking as a willingness to acknowledge that human existence is given on certain terms and within certain limits, and a grateful acceptance of what is given. In *Totalitarianism*, where she interpreted the characteristically totalitarian belief that 'everything is possible' as an extreme example of the modern resentment against anything that is given and not man-made, she suggested that the appropriate alternative to this resentment would be *gratitude* for life as it is given to us, which means in political terms accepting and being grateful for human plurality.¹⁸ It would be fair to say that the implications of this suggestion form the central theme of her mature political thought.

The elementary articulations of *The Human Condition*

It is, then, the human *condition*, not human *nature*, with which Arendt's book is concerned.¹⁹ The point of using the term 'condition' is to challenge the hubristic fantasies of totalitarianism and modernity and to stress that we are all subject to conditions which we cannot escape. The point of avoiding talk about human 'nature' is to emphasise that human beings, unlike other creatures, are characterised by a particular openness and plurality that makes it impossible for us to identify any such definable 'nature'. If there is such a thing, only someone who could stand outside and above it would be able to define it – a god, in fact.²⁰ In *Totalitarianism*

¹⁵ 'Truth and Politics', *Between Past and Future* 263–4.

¹⁶ HC 7; Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 36, 74–5; A. Kazin, *New York Jew* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1978) 199.

¹⁷ e.g. HC 270. Cf. 'Religion and the Intellectuals', *Partisan Review* 17 (February 1950) 113–16. She regularly poured cold water on attempts to revive religion for political purposes: e.g. 'Religion and the Intellectuals' 115. ¹⁸ OTI 438.

¹⁹ For an attack on Arendt's approach to this subject, see G.J. Tolle, *Human Nature Under Fire: The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (Washington DC, University Press of America, 1982), *passim*.

²⁰ HC 10. 'politics has very little to do with the nature of man about which valid statements can not be made . . . and . . . has very much to do with the *condition* of man, namely with the fact that no matter how or what the nature of man may be (if man has a nature at all

Arendt had used different language to make a similar point. As we saw, she claimed there that the concentration camps represented an attempt at 'the transformation of human nature', stating that in the struggle with totalitarianism, 'Human nature as such is at stake.'²¹ What she had in mind was the destruction of human plurality, of individuality and spontaneity: precisely the things that make it impossible in normal circumstances to ascribe to human beings a 'nature' at all. This contrast between dehumanised 'species-being' and plural humanity is connected with her sense of an inherent tension between 'nature' on the one hand and being 'human' on the other.

At the centre of *The Human Condition* is her account of the three activities that 'are within the range of every human being': Labour, Work and Action.²² Her theory is concerned with general human capacities that correspond to features of the common human situation,²³ which she envisages in terms that are largely spatial. Human beings find themselves in an experienced landscape that divides into different areas: the Earth and the World, the Public, Private and Social realms. Since, for Arendt, the 'location of human activities' is a matter of very considerable importance,²⁴ it will be helpful to start our examination of her theory of the *vita activa* by looking at this setting in phenomenological space. As we do so, however, we shall continually have occasion to note the ways in which her account is marked by the concern with totalitarianism out of which it arose.

The earth and the world

Arendt's concept of 'the world' as distinct from 'the earth' is one of the most characteristic aspects of her thought, with manifold political implications.

properly speaking) not one man, sinful or evil, but many men live together and inhabit the earth. Without the plurality of men, there would be no politics; and this plurality is not a quality of his "nature", but is the very quintessence of his earthly condition.' 'Authority' (1953) MSS Box 56, 1.

²¹ OT1 432-3. Cf. 'Understanding and Politics', *Partisan Review* 20/4 (July-August 1953) 386; 'A Reply' to Eric Voegelin's critical review of *Totalitarianism*, *Review of Politics* 15 (January 1953) 83-4.

²² HC 5. Thinking, 'the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable' (HC 5), was deliberately excluded from her examination at this stage, and was taken up later in the enquiry that became *The Life of the Mind*: Cf. Arendt to Thompson, 31 March 1969, Rockefeller Correspondence 013824.

²³ On the parallels between her approach and that of Heidegger, see L.P. and S.K. Hinchman, 'In Heidegger's Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Phenomenological Humanism', *Review of Politics* 46 (April 1984) 183-211. On Arendt's complementary debt to Jaspers, see L.P. and S.K. Hinchman, 'Existentialism Politicized: Arendt's Debt to Jaspers', *Review of Politics* 53/3 (1991) 435-68.

²⁴ HC 73. On the temporal implications of Arendt's account of human activities, see P. Ricoeur, 'Action, Story and History - On Re-reading *The Human Condition*', *Salmagundi* 60 (Spring-Summer 1983) 60-72.

No doubt it owes something to her youthful studies of early Christian rejections of 'the world',²⁵ though these negative Christian ideas could not in themselves have led her to the very high value she came to place on it. A more obvious debt is to Heidegger's varied uses of the term. The idea that human beings do not merely 'live on the earth' but 'inhabit' a specifically human world is unquestionably derived from his insistence that men 'dwell' in the world rather than being in it in the way that water is in a glass.²⁶ But what Arendt understands by 'the world' as opposed to 'the earth' is highly distinctive, involving a characteristically humanist contrast between the home that men have made for themselves and the natural environment to which they belong as biological creatures.²⁷

Human beings as she sees them have two aspects. On the one hand we are animals, members of a species and subject to biological necessities like other animals. As such we are part of nature, which moves in endless cycles of growth and decay, one generation of animals or plants replacing the previous generation in a natural movement that is indifferent to individual specimens. Unlike other animals, however, which live a natural life on the earth as it is given to them, human beings have constructed a world of their own over and above the natural earth.²⁸

What does Arendt mean by this? *Why* is human life dependent on a humanly constructed world of civilisation? Her answer is closely connected with the anxieties that we have seen underlying her analysis of totalitarianism and Marxism: because without the world, it is very hard for human beings to be plural individuals rather than interchangeable members of a species. Only the human world can provide the stable setting within which human beings can reliably appear as distinct individuals: only the world which they share can hold those individuals together while keeping them distinct. These are points which require some elaboration.

To anyone brought up in the tradition of Wordsworthian Romanticism

²⁵ 'Love and Saint Augustine', trans. E.B. Ashton, MSS Box 66, 033300, 033304–5. Cf. R. Bultmann, 'The Understanding of Man and the World in the New Testament and in the Greek World' in Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London, SCM Press, 1955) 77–81. Arendt studied New Testament theology with Bultmann in her youth (Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 61–2).

²⁶ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (London, SCM Press, 1962) 80; 'Building Dwelling Thinking' in M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D.F. Krell (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). Arendt acknowledged her debt in what appears to be the first draft of her unpublished 1954 lecture, 'Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought' 14.

²⁷ In 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935) Heidegger distinguishes between 'earth' and 'world' and speaks of art opening up the world, but with none of the pathos of Arendt's distinction between the sheltering human world and the inhuman cycles of nature. According to Heidegger's account, 'Upon the earth and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world. In setting up a world, the work sets forth the earth' (*Basic Writings* 171). ²⁸ *HC* 134.

or German nature-worship, Arendt's assumptions about 'nature' are likely to be unfamiliar to the point of incomprehensibility. We are accustomed to think of nature as a stable, comforting setting for human life, far less hostile than the artificial world of modern cities. But we need to remember here the contrast we found running throughout *Totalitarianism* between nature and civilisation, in which 'nature' denoted barbarism, and totalitarianism amounted to a surrender to supposedly natural forces.²⁹ Arendt's view of nature owes nothing to Romanticism and a great deal to the ancient Greeks, for whom nature was an endless cycle of birth and death, growth and decay. If men are to be human, they need a world of their own to protect them against 'the sublime indifference of an untouched nature, whose overwhelming elementary force . . . will compel them to swing relentlessly in the circle of their own biological movement'.³⁰

What the human world of civilisation provides is in the first place stability. Instead of an ever-changing natural environment, the man-made world of houses, artifacts and institutions provides a stable background against which individual lives can show up and have significance.³¹ If the life-span of an individual is to be something more than merely one instance of the life of an animal species, it requires a setting that is more stable and long-lasting than itself. 'The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life . . . men . . . can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table.'³² Behind this observation we can hear the echo not only of Arendt's personal experience of what it meant to be a refugee whose world had collapsed, but also of her account of totalitarianism as a relentless, pseudo-natural torrent sweeping away all stability and, with it, all individuality.³³

According to Arendt, then, human beings are unlikely to be fully human unless they inhabit a man-made world as well as living on the natural earth. Another aspect of this individuation which the world makes possible is that since the world lies between human beings, it 'gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other'.³⁴ It creates space between individuals that does not exist by nature, and this existential space enables individuals to move about, take up different positions and see their common world from different points of view, giving them a grasp of reality that no one can

²⁹ On the version of nature-worship that was one of the strands of Nazi thinking, see R.A. Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (London, Croom Helm, 1986).

³⁰ HC 137. Cf. OT1 192.

³¹ HC 97. Cf. 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing', *Men in Dark Times* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970) 11.

³² HC 137.

³³ 'We Refugees' (1943) in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. R.H. Feldman (New York, Grove Press, 1978) 55–66; 'Ideology and Terror', *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 3rd edition (London, Allen and Unwin, 1967) 465–8.

³⁴ HC 52.

achieve on his own.³⁵ '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.'³⁶ Arendt does not deny that many human beings have survived and are surviving without inhabiting a fully established, stable world, whether in conditions of primitive symbiosis with nature, of rarified withdrawal into spirituality, or of desolate modern 'world alienation'.³⁷ She does claim, however, that 'worldlessness, alas, is always a form of barbarism', and to a very large extent her political thought hinges upon her concern with what she sees as the dangers of this 'barbarism' and her efforts to articulate and encourage its civilised counterpart.³⁸

What then *is* this world that houses us, guards us from nature, stabilizes our lives and allows us to be individuals? It is something artificial and durable produced by transforming natural material into an environment that can outlast individual human lives. It includes such things as artifacts, cultivated land and the products of organisation, such as political institutions. Part of what Arendt has in mind is the kind of thing that archaeologists find when they excavate vanished civilisations: the pyramids, the temples, the houses and roads, the terraced hillsides, the pottery, the statues in which the world of a forgotten people survives. But although something of what she understands by 'world' is of this solid, concrete, material kind – 'reification' – in fact,³⁹ and although her emphasis in *The Human Condition* is on its most material aspects, the term 'world' also encompasses solid and durable human constructions of a less visible kind, such as institutions like states⁴⁰ and churches. Perhaps the Roman body politic is the paradigm case: a political structure which was so durable that it could be thought of with pardonable hyperbole as eternal. Rome was itself the 'world' in opposition to which the early Christians asserted their own unworldliness, but which lived on in the strangely transmuted form of the Roman Catholic Church, in which Christian spirituality was reified in an 'institution of tremendous durability'.⁴¹ Arendt notes how preoccupied with this kind of worldly stability and durability the 'classical republican' thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were, and she understands the founding of the American Republic and the establishment of the Constitution as world-building of this kind.⁴²

³⁵ Cf. S.K. Hinchman, 'Common Sense and Political Barbarism in the Theory of Hannah Arendt', *Polity* 17/2 (1984) 317–39. ³⁶ HC 52.

³⁷ OT1 192–4, 'The Crisis in Culture', *Between Past and Future* 210; HC 53, 76, 204, 248.

³⁸ 'On Humanity in Dark Times' 13. ³⁹ HC 95.

⁴⁰ Cf. OT1 229–32.

⁴¹ 'What is Authority?', *Between Past and Future* 125. ⁴² OR 175, 182, 224–5.

'The world' in Arendt's sense includes durable institutions, then, as well as their visible manifestations: Parliament as well as Westminster, as it were. Furthermore, a large element of what she understands by 'world' can be summed up under the heading of culture. She suggests at times that works of art are the most characteristically 'worldly' of all things because of their exceptional durability.⁴³ Clearly, there are complexities here. The 'potential immortality'⁴⁴ that she attributes to works of art cannot be a matter of sheer physical capacity for survival. A non-biodegradable plastic container does not become a work of art and a notable manifestation of man's world-building capacity just because it is capable of cluttering up the surface of the earth indefinitely. It is clear that when she speaks of 'durability' in a cultural context, she is talking about objects that are *fit* to survive and be passed on to future generations because of their beauty, a position that begs questions we cannot discuss here.

The emphasis of her concept of 'the world' is in fact much more cultural than technological. When we read her account of how the world is created through work, as *homo faber* uses the natural material he finds on earth to construct a human artifice, we are likely to think first of technological constructions, to assume that the sort of thing Arendt is talking about is concrete in a literal sense and that motorways are prime examples of worldliness. But in fact it is clear that art rather than technology provides her model, and that the world as she envisages and values it is more emphatically a world of cultural objects and milieux than of engineering.

As we saw in her analysis of totalitarianism, the *artificiality* of 'the human artifice' has strongly positive connotations for her. Most writers who contrast 'natural' and 'artificial' do so to the detriment of the latter, taking for granted a preference long dominant in European thought, particularly since the Romantic movement. For Arendt, however, whose thought is in this as in many respects classical rather than romantic, the contrast of worldly artifice versus nature is equivalent to the contrast between civilisation and barbarism. This high valuation for the 'artificial' as opposed to the 'natural' aspects of human life may seem odd coming from a vigorous critic of modernity. For most of her fellow-critics, after all, it is precisely the unnaturalness and artificiality of modern conditions that make them deplorable. How can Arendt simultaneously value artificiality and condemn modernity? Are not modern technology and industry shining examples of man's ability to transcend nature and to superimpose a world of his own construction upon the earth?

It is essential to realise that her answer to this latter question is, 'No!'. She is able simultaneously to criticise modernity and to value the artificial world

⁴³ HC 167; 'Crisis in Culture' 209.

⁴⁴ Crisis in Culture' 209.

of civilisation above the barbarism of nature because she does not regard modernity as civilisation in the classical sense. Instead, as we have seen, modernity represents for her a kind of pseudo-nature to which the genuine human world has been sacrificed. What is wrong with the modern world is that the true worldly values of durability and fitness to house mankind have been lost. In their hubristic efforts to show that 'everything is possible', human beings have surrendered themselves to synthetic versions of natural processes which are even more threatening to humanity than nature in the raw, because genuinely natural processes are at least cyclic, whereas the pseudo-natural processes men have unleashed are speeding off on unforeseen trajectories.

All the modern developments Arendt deplores are seen by her as instances of this same impulse to sacrifice human values to pseudo-nature. Totalitarianism represents a gigantic resurrection of barbarism, turning formerly civilised men into savage hordes and aiming to reduce them further to mere animals. Marxism expresses the dominance in modern society of labourers totally occupied with the biological life of their species. Atomic weapons threaten human existence with new natural processes, while less apocalyptic forms of industrial technology have subjected mankind to a synthetic process of automatic production and consumption that mimics the cyclic order of nature and destroys the human world. 'The danger of future automation is less the much deplored mechanization and artificialization of natural life than that, its artificiality notwithstanding, all human productivity would be sucked into an enormously intensified life process and would follow automatically, without pain or effort, its ever-recurrent natural cycle.'⁴⁵

As we shall see, this interpretation of the modern predicament affects many aspects of Arendt's political thought, and is in particular at the root of some of the areas that have attracted most criticism. Upon this diagnosis of the ills of modernity, too, depends her positive political theory, which is mainly concerned with the possibility of building a Republic that can stand as a bastion of civilisation against these swirling tides of synthetic barbarism. And if her key concept of 'world' is tied to a highly contentious view of nature and pseudo-nature, it is also closely linked to equally contentious views about reality and truth that are connected both with her analysis of totalitarianism and with her debt to Heidegger. These views inform another of her key concepts, 'the public realm'.

The public realm

Of all Arendt's political ideas, the most fundamental is her observation, platitudinous but philosophically revolutionary, that human beings are

⁴⁵ *HC* 132.

plural: 'men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world'.⁴⁶ This has all sorts of implications. It means that human affairs are in constant flux from the continual irruption of new initiatives and new ideas; it means that each individual is unique, and suffers the consequent pathos of mortality; but what it means in the present connection is that, being plural, human beings can gather to form a space amongst themselves, and in that space can see their common world from different points of view and therefore talk about their common affairs. Arendt assumes (with or without ethological justification) that only human beings can do this. If sheep could talk, they would be able to use words to express their feelings and to report information, but they would not be able to discuss anything because they would all have the same point of view. Human beings, however, are not simply members of a herd, and their plurality makes possible a public space between them.

As we saw, what characteristically gathers and separates human beings is the 'world' of civilisation, and this world is a large constituent of what Arendt means by the 'public realm'. She makes clear, however that the latter is more than the world, and is in fact something much less solid and more evanescent, including anything that is looked at and especially talked about from different points of view out there in the space that forms between plural men.⁴⁷ The public realm is a place of discourse and action, and it is important to Arendt for a number of reasons connected with the ways in which human beings mark themselves off from animals.

Since recognition in the public realm bestows dignity and significance on whatever appears in it, it is, for one thing, the arena in which the achievements of human civilisation are appropriated by each generation and passed on to the next, in which human beings celebrate and cherish whatever they 'want to save from the natural ruin of time', and in which they continually 'humanize' the world by endlessly talking about it.⁴⁸ It is, furthermore, only in the public realm that human beings can overcome their mortality by making their mark as unique individuals – something that we shall have occasion to discuss later under the heading of 'Action'. But it is important not to interpret Arendt's concern in subjectivist terms. The public realm is important to her not just as a way of salvation for mortal men, not even solely as the locus of a civilisation that transcends generations, but also because it is only in the public realm that reality discloses itself. This concern with the disclosure of reality needs to be read in two contexts, both of them connected with totalitarianism, though one more directly than the other. The most obvious connection is of course with Arendt's meditations on the ideological fictions of the totalitarian movements, and on the need for a free public sphere if modern masses are to escape from the twilight of fiction into the bright light of reality. The more

⁴⁶ HC 7.

⁴⁷ HC 50–2.

⁴⁸ HC 55, 204; 'On Humanity in Dark Times' 24–5.

subtle context is provided by the influence of Heidegger and by the ways in which Arendt developed and altered his ideas in reaction against his politics.⁴⁹

Heidegger's philosophy, at any rate following his much-discussed 'turn' or *Kehre*,⁵⁰ is less concerned with man than with Being and the way Being discloses itself. 'Man is the shepherd of Being'⁵¹ and the special destiny of *Dasein*, human being-in-the-world, is to be the space in which Being shows itself. Not only do men establish bounded 'spaces' in which to dwell,⁵² but *Dasein* itself is a 'clearing' or *Lichtung*⁵³ in which Being appears. According to Heidegger, freedom for human beings means to allow truth to appear in this 'open region', to 'let beings be as the beings which they are'.⁵⁴

On the face of it, all this might seem far removed from Arendt's concerns with totalitarianism, action and plurality. Heidegger was dismissive of public life, and there is no sign in his impersonal *Dasein* of Arendt's stress on human plurality.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the step from Heidegger's philosophy to Arendt's is much shorter than one might expect. It is not just that she adopted and transformed Heidegger's concepts of 'world' and 'space': she also took over his view of reality as something that discloses itself in the spaces formed by human beings, and hence his claim that what sets man apart from animals, what is in a sense the mission of humanity, is the unique human capacity for experiencing reality in its fullness. Arendt's distinctive adaptation of his position lies in her claim that the space in which reality appears is the public and political space which plural human beings can form among themselves, and, in other words, that what is required for the disclosure of reality is a free politics that is the opposite of the regime to which Heidegger gave his support.

The affinities between Arendt's position and Heidegger's are most unambiguously obvious in her unpublished manuscripts, particularly in a German manuscript entitled 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' in which she reflects on the freedom of speech and thought enjoyed by the citizens of the Greek polis. She maintains that this should not be understood as 'freedom of expression', the right of each atomistic individual to get his personal views off his chest, but rather as the freedom to grasp reality by moving about between the different perspectives from which plural men view their

⁴⁹ Hinchman and Hinchman, 'In Heidegger's Shadow'. On the ambiguities of Arendt's relationship with Heidegger, see chapter 7 below.

⁵⁰ J.L. Mehta, *The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (New York, Harper and Row, 1971) 106–10.

⁵¹ 'Letter on Humanism' (1947) in *Basic Writings*, ed. Krell, 210.

⁵² 'Building Dwelling Thinking' (1954), *Basic Writings* 332–5.

⁵³ *Being and Time* 171: Cf. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1953) 133.

⁵⁴ 'On the Essence of Truth' (1943), *Basic Writings* 127.

⁵⁵ *Being and Time* 165.

common world.⁵⁶ Her insistence that plurality is vitally important because it allows reality to be experienced, her understanding of freedom as the experience of that reality in the space cleared by the multiple standpoints of plural men, and her evident concern that the loss of that many-sidedness is equivalent to the loss of reality, can all be read as Heideggerian views modified to take account of the experience of totalitarianism. And while the degree to which her position is a variation on Heidegger's is particularly apparent in these formulations, the broader thesis that reality appears only in the public realm formed among plural men is a constant theme of her work.⁵⁷

'Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.'⁵⁸ This is partly an observation about human experience in general, but it is also an observation about politics. Although Arendt does not entirely identify 'the public' with 'the political', she does tend to assume that the link between publicity and the disclosure of reality in its fullness must also be a link between reality and free politics. Whereas totalitarianism is a realm of fiction and illusion, a politically free public sphere in which everything can appear and be discussed is necessary for the disclosure of reality.⁵⁹ Conversely, any loss of reality and lapse into illusion tends to have politically unfortunate consequences.

This latter theme, the politically disastrous effects of a weak grasp on the many-sidedness of reality, is one of the most persistent themes of Arendt's writing from *Rahel Varnhagen* onwards. Her study of her Jewish predecessor is indeed very largely concerned with Rahel's gradual, painful emergence from the subjective illusions of romantic introspection into a world shared with others and a firmer grasp on reality, above all the political reality of what it meant to be Jewish. But Rahel's initial illusions were in no way exceptional. As we have noted, Arendt often attributed to the Jews in general a lack of political realism and consequent political naïveté following from their lack of access to the public world. In her analysis of the antecedents of totalitarianism she suggested that lack of a shared public world and the resulting loss of a grip on reality had had consequences very much more serious than mere naïveté. It was partly to

⁵⁶ 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik', MSS Box 60, 010, 13, 18–9 (no date, but evidently written shortly after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956). Cf. S. Justman, 'Hannah Arendt and the Idea of Disclosure', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 4/8 (1982) 407–23.

⁵⁷ See Parekh, *Hannah Arendt*, ch. 4; Hinchman, 'Common Sense and Political Barbarism' 323–6. ⁵⁸ *HC* 57, 199.

⁵⁹ 'Philosophy and Politics: the Problem of Action and Thought after the French Revolution' (1954) MSS Box 69, 023399, 023405; 'Philosophy and Politics' (ed. J. Kohn), *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990) 80, 87 (this is the last part of Arendt's 1954 MS).

this dream-like quality of experiences not given solidity by the many-sidedness of a public realm that she attributed the atrocities committed in Africa, 'the phantom-world of the dark continent', by adventurers who had 'escaped the reality of civilisation', against natives who lived as part of nature, without a human world or a public realm, and who appeared as 'phantoms, unreal and ghostlike'.⁶⁰

For Arendt this combination of atrocities and unreality prefigures the 'unreal', nightmarish horror of the concentration camps,⁶¹ which became possible when uprooted, lonely masses had been recruited into movements that provided them with a fictitious world.⁶² A lonely man, lacking any public discourse in which other points of view must force reality upon his attention, is thrown back on himself and the ideological logic that he can follow in the isolation of his own mind. In that situation, there are no common-sense restraints on what he may do.⁶³

This kind of linkage between politics and realism (with genuinely pluralistic discourse, common sense and civilised political behaviour all together at one end of the spectrum, and loneliness, single-track thinking and political disaster at the other) reappears constantly in Arendt's writings. So does the concomitant that in the absence of genuinely pluralistic public discourse we can neither have a firm grip on reality nor any guarantee of political sanity.⁶⁴ She was therefore very disturbed by various trends in modern times that seemed to her to tend to drive men out of a shared world and back into the isolation of their own minds, while at the same time reducing them to identical specimens of a species instead of separate and unique individuals. Much of *The Human Condition* is concerned with these trends, and behind Arendt's concern with them lies, as always, the fundamental, formative experience of totalitarianism.

One of the painful features of that experience had been Heidegger's espousal of Nazism, which put in question not only his integrity as a person but the worth of his philosophy and perhaps even the worth of philosophy itself. Arendt's claim that reality discloses itself in the public realm of politics should therefore be seen as part of the hidden debate with Heidegger in which she worked out many of her positions by adapting and altering those of her master,⁶⁵ and this particular claim generated two problems to which she devoted a great deal of thought over the years, and which surface in *The Human Condition* as well as in many other places in her writings. One of them concerns the relation of philosophy to politics. If

⁶⁰ OTI 186–92. ⁶¹ OTI 414–17.

⁶² OTI 342–3, 351–2. ⁶³ 'Ideology and Terror' 477.

⁶⁴ See for example her comments on the decision-makers responsible for the Vietnam War in 'Lying in Politics', *Crises of the Republic* 18–20. Cf. Hinchman, 'Common Sense and Political Barbarism' 317–39.

⁶⁵ Hinchman and Hinchman, 'In Heidegger's Shadow' 196–209.

reality discloses itself in the public arena formed by plural men, whereas minds in isolation are prey to illusion and the loss of common sense, how does that square with the long philosophical tradition according to which truth is achieved in *solitary* reflection, or with Arendt's own experience that the life of the mind requires withdrawal from the common world? How are the claims of philosophy and politics to be reconciled?

And besides this, there was another problem generated by Arendt's location of reality in the public realm. What of those human experiences and activities that do *not* show their reality in public, but which are actually distorted by attempts to bring them out into the open? What have goodness and love to do with the public world of politics? Each of these topics was at the same time a matter of high abstraction and an urgent practical problem thrown up by the experience of totalitarianism. Each of them, also, formed the subject of reflections over many years, and although both surface in *The Human Condition* we shall postpone consideration of them to later chapters, directing our attention instead to Arendt's distinctions between the public, the private and the social.

Arendt claims that in modern times, the authentic meaning of both 'public' and 'private' has been obscured by the rise of another category which she calls 'the social', and by the increasing domination of politics by social concerns. We shall look in a moment at the different question of what exactly she means by 'social', but let us first pause to note that when she wants to illustrate the categories 'public' and 'private' her way of doing so is to refer to ancient Athens.⁶⁶ Why does she do this? Is it simply the reflex of someone afflicted by 'Hellenic nostalgia'?⁶⁷ The answer is not as simple as that, as we shall see when we come to discuss 'action'. For all Arendt's undoubted admiration for the Greeks, she did not regard Athens as a political model in any exclusive sense. She was highly critical of some aspects of Athenian politics, and when discussing the way in which traditional political philosophy had ignored or suppressed authentic political experiences, she habitually referred to a range of sources which included the Roman Republican experience of foundation, the Christian discovery of forgiveness, the pre-polis Greek experience of setting out on a great enterprise and the revolutions of the eighteenth century as well as Athenian democracy.⁶⁸ But in *The Human Condition*, where her concern was not so much with politics specifically as with a wider analysis of the conditions of human life, she had two reasons for finding Athens a

⁶⁶ HC 28–37.

⁶⁷ N. O'Sullivan, 'Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society' in A. de Crespigny and K. Minogue (ed.), *Contemporary Political Philosophers* (London, Methuen, 1976) 228–51; J.N. Shklar, 'Hannah Arendt as Pariah', *Partisan Review* 50/1 (1983) 71.

⁶⁸ 'The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism' (1953) MSS Box 68, 12.

particularly useful illustration of matters to do with the public realm. For one thing, Athens was the place where (in the terms of her debate with Heidegger) the discovery was made that reality discloses itself in the space formed by discourse between plural men. For another, the distinction between 'political' and 'social' that she wanted to make was partly a distinction between Greek and Latin terminology. In the sharp Greek separation between the public life of the polis and the private life of the household, Arendt found a vivid model of the distinction which the rise of 'society' has blurred.

In Arendt's view, the *private* sphere in ancient Athens consisted of a household with a definite location on its family property. Since the household was also the unit of economic production, all the natural, material side of human life – all the labour, in Arendt's terminology – took place in private, away from the light of the public arena. Inside the cloistered privacy of his own household, the citizen concerned himself with the material welfare of himself and his family. The household was a place of subjection, not only because it was a little despotism in which the patriarch habitually used violence to rule his women, children and slaves, but also because all concerned were subject to the inexorable necessities of the life process, which demand production, consumption and procreation.⁶⁹ When the master of the household emerged from this dark realm of biological necessity into the light of the public arena to join his peers and to deliberate with them on the concerns of their common world, he left behind him domination, subjection to necessity and concern with biological life, which were merely preconditions for the authentically human activities that went on in the public realm.

For the Athenians (at any rate in Arendt's account of them) public and private life were therefore quite distinct, but since their time the characteristics of both public and private have become blurred as 'society' has superseded ancient household and polis alike. What, then, does Arendt mean by 'society'?

Society

Arendt's use of the term 'society' and her accompanying distinction between 'the social' and 'the political' are notoriously hard to grasp. Few readers feel confident that they can see exactly what she is getting at, and even fewer find her view persuasive. But although her position is highly idiosyncratic and contains internal problems, as will become apparent, it is considerably more comprehensible when approached from the direction of the reflections on totalitarianism considered in the last two chapters.

⁶⁹ HC 31.

The first point to note is a simple linguistic one. The notion of 'society' is often used as 'a shorthand label for the fabric of social phenomena in general',⁷⁰ a catch-all concept that appears to include everything. The implications of this common usage are firstly that society must have existed as long as humanity itself, and secondly that any specific human activity, such as politics, must be embedded in and to some extent dependent upon society. But this is emphatically not the sense in which Arendt used the word. When she talks about 'society' she does not mean the sum total of human relations, but rather a particular mode of relations that has special features and is characteristic of particular places and times. Just as historians of political thought agree that 'the state' has not always existed, but came gradually into being in the early modern period of European history,⁷¹ so Arendt maintains that 'society' did not exist until that same period; that 'social' relations developed gradually over many centuries, at first affecting only part of the population; and that only now, in modern 'mass societies', have social relations become all-inclusive.

What is special, then, about 'social' relations? Arendt's thinking here reflects the anxiety she had shown in *Totalitarianism* about the reduction of human beings to a uniform species and the destruction of humane civilisation. 'Society' in her sense is contrasted with an authentic public realm in which individuals are united in such a way that their plurality is preserved and made manifest. This is possible where they are held together by a common world which lies outside and between them, so that in the public space which they form, reality can appear in its manysidedness. 'Society', by contrast, is a kind of pseudo-public realm, a distortion of authentic public life characterised by a combination of conformity and egocentricity.⁷² In society, human beings are bound together, but the concerns that bind them are essentially private, to do with production and consumption in a common economy and a common mass culture. They are united because their needs and desires are the same and are catered for collectively, but they are not gathered around a common world that would allow them to be plural individuals.

Herdlike uniformity is therefore of the essence of 'society' as Arendt understands it. There are in fact two different strands in her thought, one of them economic, concerned with the increasingly 'socialised' mankind

⁷⁰ L.H. Mayhew, 'Society', *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. D.L. Sills (Macmillan, 1968) vol. 14 577.

⁷¹ Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978) vol. II 349–58; K. Dyson, *The State Tradition in Western Europe* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1980) 25–44.

⁷² As Sandra Hinchman has pointed out to me, this is very similar to Tocqueville's portrait of 'democratic' society (A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. H. Reeve (London, Oxford University Press, 1946) 366–70).

united by production whose advent was hailed by Marx; the other cultural, concerned with the uniformity of mores and life-style castigated by theorists of 'mass society'. As we shall see, the juxtaposition of these two strands is linked with her theory of totalitarianism.

The Human Condition offers an account of the rise of 'society' that starts from the ancient world and puts the emphasis on the economic side of 'socialised man'. In ancient times there was a deep gulf between the citizen's activities *qua* citizen and his life as a private person, and all material concerns were private, not public. After the fall of Rome, the public sphere ceased to exist (except, ambiguously, in the life of the Church) and what was left was simply 'a conglomeration of families' – the households of kings and nobles, merchants and peasants, and the quasi-families of guilds and monasteries, all of them immersed in their own private affairs.⁷³ When the notion of relations in public amongst men emerged again at the end of the Middle Ages, it emerged (in spite of the efforts of some Renaissance thinkers to revive the ancient republic) in a different form. The development of a market economy taking in more and more of the population meant that material concerns that had formerly been the private affair of each separate household became a set of bonds tying many households together, while the increasingly self-conscious spokesmen for the new forms of commercial wealth began to demand that a new public authority, the state, should protect and promote this network of private interests.⁷⁴

Society came into being, then, when material interests became the collective concern of the whole nation and the care of the state. Since the take-off of economic modernisation and the binding of ever-widening circles of people into an interdependent economy, the tendency has grown to regard the political order as the handmaid of economic purposes. To Arendt, the differences between successive waves of political economists, mercantilists, laissez-faire liberals and socialists are insignificant beside the fact that all of them share a 'social' outlook according to which the point of politics is to further the activities of production and consumption, that is, the life process.⁷⁵

The peculiarity of this overwhelming concern for life and its needs is that it is on the one hand the most utterly private and personal concern of each individual and at the same time something all mankind has in common as members of the same species. Since all men as human beings are urgently concerned with the necessities of life, as soon as such matters became a public concern it was easy for them to swamp all other considerations and for politics to be regarded simply as administration, the management of the collective life process of mankind,⁷⁶ for the purposes of which individuals

⁷³ HC 29, 34. ⁷⁴ HC 68. ⁷⁵ HC 33, 44–5.

⁷⁶ HC 116; 'Freedom and Politics: A Lecture', *Chicago Review* 14/1 (Spring 1960) 31.

can be regarded as identical and interchangeable. Society, therefore 'is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance', while 'the monolithic character of every type of society, its conformism which allows of only one interest and one opinion, is ultimately rooted in the oneness of mankind'. The natural political form that corresponds to this society is not democracy but rule by a bureaucracy charged with national housekeeping.⁷⁷

This, then, is the economic side of 'society' in Arendt's sense. There is another side to it, however. In ordinary language, besides talking about 'social issues', meaning matters to do with the sort of material needs we have just seen Arendt focussing on, we also talk about 'social events', 'social status' and so on, meaning a quite different area of life. Arendt, too, uses 'society' to refer to the area of modern life that one might perhaps call the sphere of gregariousness, the arena of public consumption, of fashion, of social success, the origins of which she finds in the 'high society' of earlier centuries. This kind of society originated in the aristocratic milieu of royal courts, especially Versailles. Although lacking a *res publica*, this was a public realm of a sort, in the sense that it was a highly visible way of life carried on before spectators and much concerned with appearances. Those who appeared in society were performers on a public stage whose performance was watched critically by others. But the society of courts and salons was a deformed public realm whose inauthenticity and hypocrisy were denounced by cultural critics from Rousseau onwards. Far from being an arena within which the plurality of individuals could be confirmed and their different viewpoints shed light on the world, society was intensely conformist, enforcing adherence to the fluctuating currents of taste, behaviour and opinion and putting great pressure on individuals to play the appropriate roles.⁷⁸

The eighteenth-century society of the Parisian salons which Rousseau denounced included only a tiny section of the population, but it seemed to Arendt that since that time the infection had spread like wildfire, extending in the nineteenth century into the bourgeois society whose uneasy relations with Jewish parvenus she had described in *Totalitarianism*.⁷⁹ In the twentieth century, as leisure and consumption expanded, the same social traits had spread so far that entire populations were behaving like aristocrats from the *ancien régime*, devoted to conspicuous consumption, conforming to fashion and obsessed with their social status.

It is clear, then, that 'society' for Arendt has a double connotation, to do partly with 'national housekeeping' and partly with the absorption of whole populations into forms of life formerly characteristic of 'high

⁷⁷ HC 40–6.

⁷⁸ HC 39–41; OTI 84; OR 104–6; 'Crisis in Culture' 199–200.

⁷⁹ OTI 54–88.

society'.⁸⁰ We can best understand the conjunction of the two by recalling that within the vocabulary of the European intelligentsia from which Arendt came, 'bourgeois' was a term of opprobrium referring both to capitalist economics and to social philistinism.⁸¹ As we saw earlier, that traditional prejudice against the bourgeoisie was conspicuous in *Totalitarianism*, but what is perhaps more important is that it was complemented there by the distinction between 'bourgeois' and 'citoyen'.⁸² In criticising 'society', Arendt was not issuing an unqualified condemnation of modernity, but was trying to distinguish between its 'social' and 'political' aspects. In particular, she was struck from her earliest days in America by the contrast there between social conformism and political freedom,⁸³ and her conception of 'society' in both its aspects is counterposed to the possibility of a republic of citizens.

Both aspects of society represent for her deformed versions of public life, characterised by conformity rather than plurality: 'the assumed one interest of society as a whole in economics as well as the assumed one opinion of polite society in the salon'.⁸⁴ One of them leads to a view of politics as concerned primarily with running the economy, the other to Madison Avenue-style deformations of 'public relations', and both of them push out of view any understanding of politics as the interaction of plural citizens concerning themselves with the public world that lies between them. Both of them, therefore, act as foils for Arendt's attempt to urge upon her contemporaries, and especially upon her American compatriots, a more appropriate understanding of what public spirit and the public interest involved – a topic to which we shall return when we investigate her republicanism in a later chapter.

One of the remarkable features of her analysis is that it cuts across the familiar distinction between 'society' and 'community', *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. Ever since the eighteenth century writers have analysed the process of modernisation as a movement from close, informal, natural communities to open, impersonal, individualistic societies. Romantics have deplored the loss of warmth and naturalness, liberals celebrated the gains in freedom and rationality, but both have agreed on the direction of change. While Arendt is blessedly free from romantic nostalgia for *Gemeinschaft*,

⁸⁰ The chapter on 'The Social Question' in *On Revolution* discusses both the irruption into politics of the material concerns of the poor and the revolutionaries' reaction against aristocratic hypocrisy. *OR* 59–114.

⁸¹ Cf. A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 1987) 157.

⁸² *OTI* 144.

⁸³ Arendt to Jaspers 29 January 1946, *Briefwechsel* 67; 'Lecture at the Rand School' (1948 or 1949) MSS Box 70, 9; 'Europe and America: the Threat of Conformism', *Commonweal* 60/25 (24 September 1954) 607–10. In this respect, as in many, she followed Tocqueville.

⁸⁴ *HC* 40.

the peculiarity of her position is that instead of seeing modern society as impersonal, rational, individualistic and so on she sees it as stifflingly uniform, paternalistic and monolithic. Society as she sees it is like the familiar liberal nightmare of bureaucratic socialism, except that for her that nightmare includes *liberal* societies themselves. Drawing on work by Myrdal, she asserts summarily that liberal economics rests on the 'communistic fiction' that society has a single interest, so that socialism is merely liberal economics taken to its logical conclusion.⁸⁵

Perhaps if we consider that Arendt worked out these ideas during the post-war heyday of Keynesian interventionism, when government planning of the economy was popular in intellectual circles and Hayek was only a voice crying in the wilderness against this 'road to serfdom',⁸⁶ her dismissal of liberal society as a mere step on the way to socialism may seem more comprehensible. But in the light of our previous exploration of the evolution of her thinking about totalitarianism, it is clear that her picture of 'society' as the stifflingly monolithic collective life of a herd of human animals had as much to do with preconceptions as with observations. We saw in the previous chapter that once she began to analyse totalitarianism in terms of the subordination of human beings to quasi-natural processes, she found analogous developments all around her. The process of terror unleashed by the totalitarian leaders was analogous not only to the explosion of atomic weapons, but also to the acceleration of a collective life process recognised and celebrated by Marx but begun by the rise of capitalism. Her fundamental focus on totalitarianism understood in a particular way led her to see monolithic uniformity in Western societies where other observers see diversity and pluralism, and although in her analysis it is the biological unity of the species that finds expression in this monism, the presence of conformist consumerism – the other side of 'society' – must have helped to give plausibility to her account.

What is lacking in this view of society is of course any appreciation of the point made over and over again by political economists from Smith to Hayek about the opportunities for personal freedom offered by the rise of a market economy, or of the role of 'civil society' in facilitating plurality, space between people and public discourse. Hegel, who saw 'civil society' as a concomitant of the market economy, envisaged it as a realm of competitiveness and conflict based on emancipation from traditional family ties, a sphere in which individuals become aware of their distinctiveness even though, by a dialectical process, they also become aware of their interdependence and their need for reunion at the higher level

⁸⁵ HC 44. Cf. R.S. Beiner, 'Hannah Arendt on Capitalism and Socialism', *Government and Opposition* 25/3 (Summer 1990) 359–70.

⁸⁶ F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1944).

of the state.⁸⁷ More recently, political thinkers influenced by the dissident intellectuals of Eastern Europe have been making good use of the notion of 'civil society' to refer not to the economy but to the realm of free association (familiar in liberal democracies but lacking in communist regimes) in which citizens join together to form all kinds of organisations from trade unions to Gay Rights groups.⁸⁸ Any such appreciation of the flexibility and pluralism of society is conspicuously lacking in Arendt's theory. We shall see later that she did have some interesting things to say about the contrast between communal ties and citizenship, but as far as 'society' itself is concerned, even otherwise sympathetic critics have found her thinking unpersuasive.⁸⁹ I shall argue later that important aspects of her political thought are in fact detachable from her theory of totalitarianism and her pessimistic analysis of modern society, and are more relevant to contemporary politics than she herself realised.

Labour

Although Arendt announces on the first page of chapter 3 of *The Human Condition* that she proposes to make an 'unusual' distinction between labour and work,⁹⁰ exposition of her theory of labour is not in fact the chapter's main theme. If we want a straightforward account of what she means by 'labour' we will do well to look elsewhere,⁹¹ for in *The Human Condition* she is preoccupied rather with changes in the *status* of labouring that accompanied the rise of modernity, mediated through writers such as Smith and Marx who were unaware of what they were doing because they confused 'labour' with 'work'. Like her account of 'society', that is, her analysis of the phenomenon of labouring is closely bound up with her theory of modernity. As we shall see, this is important. For the sake of clarity, however, it will be helpful first to look at the characteristics she attributes to labour before going on to her views about its place in modern society.

The characteristics of labour as an activity

(1) Labour is *natural*. In contrast to work, which superimposes a human world upon the earth and therefore 'corresponds to the unnaturalness of

⁸⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1942) 122–55.

⁸⁸ J. Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society* (London, Verso, 1988); J. Keane (ed.), *Civil Society and the State* (London, Verso, 1988).

⁸⁹ e.g. R.J. Bernstein, 'Rethinking the Social and the Political' in Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Cambridge, Polity, 1986) 238–59.

⁹⁰ HC 79.

⁹¹ 'Labor, Work, Action' (1964) in J.W. Bernauer SJ (ed.), *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Boston/Dordrecht/Lancaster, Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) 31–4.

human existence', labour is dictated primarily by man's biological needs. In the phrase from Marx that Arendt liked to quote, labour is 'man's metabolism with nature'.⁹² Unlike other animals, which consume what they find without transforming it, human beings labour to produce what they then consume.⁹³ But this does not alter the fact that labour is an activity dictated by man's biological condition, like the parturition with which it shares a name. Labour simply keeps the species going without building a human world or revealing human plurality, and in so far as human beings are nothing but labourers they are in effect just interchangeable members of another animal species subsisting on the face of the earth.⁹⁴

(2) Labour is *cyclic*, part of nature's circular motion of growth and decay. Its products, such as food, are produced only to be consumed in a cycle of endless repetition, leaving behind no durable residue. Unlike work, which sets out to make something that will not only outlast the activity of making it, but perhaps outlast the maker as well, the products of labour have to be continually repeated, and never reach any end.

(3) Labour is *arduous*, a form of toil and pain to which nature has condemned the human race, and which is directly analogous to the pains of childbirth.⁹⁵ Where this toil is not frustrated, however, a natural contentment arises out of the cycle of labour and rest, production and consumption that allows the *animal laborans* to enjoy 'the sheer bliss of being alive which we share with all living creatures'. Arendt wrote appreciatively of this kind of animal happiness, though she made it clear that she thought it beneath human dignity to be content with that.⁹⁶ She also worried about the future of such human animals in a world where machines were disrupting this elemental cycle of labour and recuperation, first by making labouring easier and ultimately by making labourers redundant.

(4) Labour is *necessary*, forced upon human beings by their biological condition. Historically, it has been possible for some to escape from this necessity themselves, but only by doubling its weight on the slaves or serfs whom they forced to labour for them.⁹⁷ This was possible, however, because of another momentous characteristic:

(5) Labour is *fertile*. Like the reproduction with which it has so much in common, labour tends to produce a surplus, more than is necessary to keep the generations going.⁹⁸ It therefore offers the potentiality of limitless growth, that 'liberation of the life process' on which, Arendt believed, modern economic and social development were based.

⁹² HC 98. ⁹³ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 1.

⁹⁴ HC 84, 96, 106, 118. ⁹⁵ 'Labor, Work, Action' 32.

⁹⁶ HC 106, 108, 134; 'Labor, Work, Action' 33.

⁹⁷ HC 83-4, 119. ⁹⁸ HC 105-6.

(6) Labour is *private*, in contrast to Arendt's understanding of the 'public realm' explained above. Since labouring is a matter of supplying the necessities of life, it forces each man to concentrate on his own bodily needs rather than being concerned with the common world and with interactions with plural individuals. The labourer is 'alone with his body, facing the naked necessity to keep himself alive'. Since the rise of 'society', this private natural function has been brought out into the light of public attention, but in Arendt's eyes this does not alter the fact that people whose lives are dominated by labour are not fully human beings, but 'worldless specimens of the species mankind'.⁹⁹

Up to a point, then, what Arendt is concerned to do is to make a phenomenological distinction between labour and work, between serving biological necessity and building a human world, and one way of considering her thought is to stay at this level of analysis and to point out the advantages and disadvantages of her categories. If her account of labour is intended as part of a comprehensive phenomenological description of human activities, its deficiencies are obvious. There are, it is true, some areas of experience where the contrast between labour and work makes instinctive sense. Women in particular may be struck by the fact that the category of 'labour' captures so many of their traditional activities, not only the business of actually giving birth, but all the endless ministering to the life process of their families by preparing food that is promptly consumed and keeping nature at bay by washing dishes that are promptly dirtied. One might even speculate that it took a female thinker to notice the combination of necessity and futility in most human toil, and its notable *lack* of 'productivity' in the sense of producing anything at all lasting.

But although Arendt speaks of 'labour' as a single, homogeneous phenomenon, ambiguities within it are apparent even when it is used to analyse simple premodern economies, and its direct applicability to modern forms of employment is extremely problematic. At first sight, the distinction between labour and work seem to apply very well to activities in, say, the early medieval economy. It is indeed illuminating to make a contrast between the unending labour of the serfs who toiled to win subsistence from the earth, and the work of the masons who added cathedrals to the world that still stand as monuments to the human capacity to transcend mere animal life. Even here, however, the picture is not quite as clear as it appears to be. For one thing, as Arendt herself admits, there are grey areas where labour and work converge. Cathedrals, however splendidly built, will not last unless they are continually maintained. The human world is perpetually threatened by erosion and decay, and will crumble back into earth unless nature is continually kept at bay. This sort of care and maintenance is labour rather than work because it is endless,

⁹⁹ HC 115, 212, 112, 118.

repetitive and produces no lasting results, but, as Arendt concedes, it is not precisely imposed by biological necessity and it is closely connected with the human world.¹⁰⁰

That is one way, then, in which labour and work converge. Another is that agriculture, apparently the purest example of endless, repetitive labour, *does* in fact give rise to one of the elements of the lasting human world, namely the cultivated soil that is one of the prime differences between a humanised world and a natural wilderness. Arendt points out that this lasts only as long as labour is continually repeated,¹⁰¹ but the difference between this and the maintenance of cathedrals is a matter of time, and surely a difference of degree rather than of kind.

Even in referring to premodern times, therefore, Arendt's categories indicate a difference in general orientation to the world rather than a hard-and-fast distinction.¹⁰² Their application to contemporary conditions seems at first sight even more difficult, since labour is in her terms a *natural* activity, something dictated by biological necessity, whereas one of the hallmarks of a modern economy is precisely the small proportion of the population engaged in production of the necessities of life.

But this sort of discussion is rather beside Arendt's point, which is not, essentially, to provide a comprehensive classification of human activities. Her purpose is partly to draw attention to the place of natural, biological necessity in the human condition, but also, and even more crucially, to point out that modern society has extended the sphere of necessity by supplementing biological nature with an artificial counterpart. Her analysis needs to be read as a continuation of her reflections on totalitarianism, for what chiefly interests her is that forces within peaceful, non-terroristic Western societies have been quietly contributing to the totalitarian end of turning humanity into an animal species. In *Totalitarianism* she had depicted the expansion inherent in capitalism as a force that had done much to undermine the structures of civilisation and make way for neo-barbarism. By the time she came to write *The Human Condition*, however, reflections on Marx had deepened her analysis, and the significance of capitalism had come to be the way in which it had expanded and exalted the sphere of production and consumption, taking the life process out of its naturally cyclic rhythm and setting it off on a new trajectory with an accelerating motion.

In *The Human Condition* she traces the ways in which political theorists from Locke to Marx reflected this development, and the confusions into which they fell in their efforts to understand in terms of inherited categories a 'process of growing wealth' which they could not but see 'as a natural

¹⁰⁰ HC 100

¹⁰¹ HC 138.

¹⁰² On the problems of trying to apply Arendt's categories, see J. Ring, 'On Needing Both Marx and Arendt: Alienation and the Flight from Inwardness', *Political Theory* 17/3 (August 1989) 439-40.

process, automatically following its own laws'.¹⁰³ Instead of production and consumption being natural necessities pressing on the individual, to be satisfied before he could embark on less animal activities, they became the concern of a new collective subject, 'socialised mankind',¹⁰⁴ manifest in industrialised labour and celebrated in the writings of Marx. As machines speeded up the process of production, so more and more aspects of the human world have become 'consumer goods', part of a vastly expanded pseudo-nature. Arendt had maintained in 'Ideology and Terror' that it was of the essence of totalitarianism to level the boundaries of the human world and to bind all human individuals into one in order to liberate the inhuman forces of nature or history. Her analysis of the modern expansion of labour and the life process echoes the same images.¹⁰⁵ Just as, in her view, the frantically hubristic totalitarian belief that 'everything is possible' led only to the destruction of human qualities, so the great expansion of economic and technological powers that Marx and others believed would lead to liberation had actually led, in her view, only to the increasing degradation of man to an animal, the *animal laborans*.¹⁰⁶

As in the case of totalitarianism, Arendt does not concede the determinist claim that the processes concerned are indeed inevitable and unstoppable, but thinking about this point did lead her into reflections on necessity and politics. She was careful to stress in *The Human Condition* that the labourers themselves were not to blame for the modern celebration of the animal business of production and consumption, which got underway long before they were in a position to have any influence. Furthermore, the political history of the labor movement showed that labourers need not be mere human animals, and can be free political actors.¹⁰⁷ Just as *bourgeois can be citoyens*, so, it seems, can proletarians. But although this line of thought must have been comforting to a person of radical sympathies, Arendt was not at all sure that things were as simple as that. In the course of her reflections on Marx she had at one stage suggested that the political emancipation of the labouring class did imply a society in which labouring values were dominant,¹⁰⁸ and one of the problems she wrestled with in her later writings, notably *On Revolution*, was the conflict between the demand of the oppressed for justice and the threat posed to political freedom by the emancipation of the poor. Since this is a train of thought that remains largely below the surface of *The Human Condition*, we will postpone consideration of most of its aspects until later.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ HC 111. ¹⁰⁴ HC 116. ¹⁰⁵ 'Ideology and Terror' 463–8; HC 111–35.

¹⁰⁶ HC 133–5. ¹⁰⁷ HC 126, 215–19.

¹⁰⁸ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft, short MS) 8.

¹⁰⁹ In an article published in 1978, before I read Arendt's MSS, I described this train of thought as a 'contradiction'. This now strikes me as a misleading simplification (M. Canovan, 'The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought', *Political Theory* 6/1 (February 1978) 5–26).

One point that is worth stressing here, however, is that Arendt uses the category of labour to refer to the service of two different kinds of necessity, the inescapable biological necessity imposed by nature *and* the artificial necessity imposed by the pseudo-natural processes of society within which we are all engaged in making a living. As she would argue uncompromisingly in *On Revolution* and elsewhere, genuine natural necessity is not compatible with political freedom or any of the other refinements of civilisation. Free citizens before the modern age built their republics at the terrible cost of enslaving their labourers, and modern attempts at revolution under conditions of dire poverty are doomed to fail. As a result of economic growth, it is now possible in principle to overcome desperate poverty, so that 'the wreckage of freedom on the rock of necessity . . . is no longer unavoidable'.¹¹⁰ The difficulty is, however, that that very economic growth has itself created the artificial necessity of modern society, in which people are too much absorbed in consumption to be interested in citizenship.

This is a problem to which we shall return when we consider Arendt's thinking about republics, citizenship and equality. For the moment, however, let us turn to the second of her three modes of human activity, work.

Work

Just as the account of 'labour' presented in *The Human Condition* is not self-contained but is closely linked with Arendt's analysis of modernity, so her account of 'work' also is more than a phenomenological analysis of a particular kind of activity. It is in fact a point on which several other trains of thought converge, all of them arising out of her reflections on totalitarianism, and all of them connected with her sense that totalitarianism had been possible in part because the nature of political activity was so widely misunderstood. As we saw in the previous chapter, Arendt had found seeds of totalitarianism in Marx's interpretation of politics in terms drawn from a confused experience of work and labour. But if the stress on labour and the life process of socialised mankind was Marx's special contribution, misunderstandings of politics in terms of work were very much more venerable, traceable, so Arendt believed, right back to Plato and vitiating the whole Western tradition of political philosophy. There are as a result at least three contexts we need to bear in mind when reading Arendt on 'work': firstly the project of distinguishing the human world from nature, and therefore work from labour; secondly the more ambitious

¹¹⁰ 'Revolution and Freedom: a Lecture' in H. Tramer (ed.), *In zwei Welten: Siegfried Moses zum fünfundsiebzigsten Geburtstag* (Tel Aviv, Bitan, 1962) 598.

project of refounding political thinking in opposition to the distortions of philosophers; and thirdly (a train of thought related to both of these, but promoted above all by the events of her time) reflections over many years about politics and morals, ends and means in politics. The first of these contexts we have already explored; the second and third will engage our attention later. All we need to be aware of for the moment is that, like so many of Arendt's concepts, the notion of 'work' belongs within an invisible web of theorising that sometimes exerts strains upon it.

Much of what Arendt has to say about work is a mirror-image of her account of labour. In particular, her distinction between the two is very closely linked with her crucial distinction between the world and nature. As she says near the beginning of the book, 'The human condition of work is worldliness', whereas 'The human condition of labor is life itself.'¹¹¹ In so far as a man spends his life in labour, he is no more than a specimen of *animal laborans*, but work raises him to the dignity of *homo faber*. For work, unlike labour, does not simply feed the endless process of consumption that natural or pseudo-natural life demands: work means making *things*, solid objects which are meant to last, to be used rather than consumed and to contribute to the world, the durable human artifice that provides men with a home upon the earth.

Arendt's account of work lays enormous stress upon the durability of the things it produces. The products of work have the stability to resist, if only for a time, the endless flux of nature. They are literally *objective*, standing over against human beings and providing the only guarantee of permanence and solidity. Defying the pervasive modern romanticism that exalts spontaneity just as it worships nature, Arendt celebrates 'reification', the process whereby *homo faber* captures the evanescent and turns it into a solid, lasting thing. The culmination of this activity is the creation of works of art, in which human feelings and natural materials, both of them living and perpetually changing, are miraculously transfigured into permanent forms that take on a public existence and withstand the passage of time and mortality.¹¹²

One of the most stark contrasts between work and labour is that whereas the latter is an essentially unfree activity consisting in servitude to nature, the former is an experience of Promethean mastery. Killing the tree and carving its wood into his own image, melting metals and forcing them into new forms, '*homo faber* conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth'.¹¹³ This is an experience not only of triumphant strength but also of

¹¹¹ HC 7. ¹¹² HC 136–9, 168–9.

¹¹³ HC 139. If Arendt had challenged the Romantic assumption that peasant life is close to nature, and had taken the life of primitive hunter-gatherers as her model of labour, she would have had to regard violence as more characteristic of labour than of work.

violence and destruction, and one of the reasons why it was a matter of great importance for Arendt to distinguish work from action was that where politics was thought of in terms of making things, violence against the 'human material' was inevitable. We shall return to this point when we look in detail at Arendt's view on morals and politics.

Unlike labour, which is cyclic and endless, and therefore is easily mechanised as a continuous process which labourers serve just as they once served nature, work (according to Arendt) has a definite end in the double sense of being governed by the specific purpose of making a product and being finished when the product has been made. Workers do not adapt themselves to the rhythms of machines; instead, they use tools which are adapted to the object they are setting out to make. Work does not serve the endlessness and futility of the life process, but is governed by the needs and standards of the world of created objects.¹¹⁴ We saw that according to Arendt, labour shuts people off from the public world because it forces them to concentrate on their own bodily needs. Labourers may toil collectively in a gang, but this is the sort of herdlike togetherness that merely duplicates the same experiences inside each self-enclosed body, and that seemed to Arendt to have an alarming affinity with the unity of the mass members of a totalitarian movement.¹¹⁵ Although work is not in itself a public activity, it has a strong affinity with the public realm because the things it produces exist in the world in the presence of everyone. Within the activity of work, therefore, there is a clear hierarchy of purpose anchored in the world itself, and the end to be achieved does indeed justify the means, the use of particular material or tools.

So far, so good: but Arendt suggests that because *homo faber* is so used to thinking in instrumental terms of ends and means, he has a fatal tendency to turn the same kind of philistine thinking on the objects of the world themselves, and to regard them, too, merely as means to further ends. He can very easily be convinced that the world of civilisation, works of art included, must itself need justification in these terms, and can only be understood as a means to satisfy human needs.¹¹⁶ As we shall see, Arendt thought that this was one of the reasons for the triumph of 'labourers' values' in modern times. She also called on this self-destructive feature of work to explain the low esteem in which it was held in ancient Athens, where the public realm and public life were held in high regard. Philosophers from Plato onwards, on the other hand, thought more highly of work: but that was because they distrusted action, and preferred to interpret politics in terms of fabrication.¹¹⁷ If both they and Marx were wrong, and if the

¹¹⁴ HC 151-2.

¹¹⁵ HC 212; 'Ideology and Terror' 474-8.

¹¹⁶ HC 154-7.

¹¹⁷ HC 222-8.

human activity that lies at the root of politics is something different from both work and labour, what is that something? What is 'action'?

Action in *The Human Condition*

If one tries to read *The Human Condition* as a work of political philosophy it seems bafflingly perverse. Not only are the sections on 'labour' and 'work' only tangentially concerned with politics, but even the section on 'action' is not straightforwardly so concerned. But as we observed at the start of this chapter, *The Human Condition* is a 'prolegomena' to political theory rather than a fully fledged specimen of the genre, and the section on 'action', is, accordingly, not so much about politics itself as about the aspect of the human condition out of which politics arises. Arendt's primary aim is not to describe an ideal state or to make political recommendations, but to distinguish this particular aspect of the human condition from the others in terms of which politics is often misconstrued. The central preoccupations of this section follow directly from her meditations on totalitarianism, Marxism and the Western philosophical tradition, all of which seemed to her to have denied or ignored the most politically relevant characteristic of human beings – their plurality. Totalitarianism represented for her a deliberate attempt to erase all traces of plurality and spontaneity from human beings, while Marxism, she thought, saw mankind as a herd of animals with no individuality or initiative. Within the philosophical tradition forged by solitary thinkers since Plato, Man was an abstract subject that existed only in the singular. In defiance of all of them, Arendt insisted that the feature of the human condition from which politics starts is that 'men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world', so that 'we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live'.¹¹⁸

As she emphasised, this plurality is dynamic. It is of the essence of the human condition that the persons who inhabit the world are continually changing. New human beings are continually being born, but there is more to this than the addition of new physical specimens to the species. New individuals grow up and enter the human world by speaking and acting, and 'this insertion is like a second birth'¹¹⁹ because 'the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting'. In spite of totalitarianism and Marxism, human beings are not simply 'species-beings' obeying natural laws, while in spite of the philosophers, the fundamental *political* feature of man's existence is not mortality but 'natality', 'the new beginning inherent in birth' which makes action possible.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ HC 7–8.

¹¹⁹ HC 176.

¹²⁰ HC 9.

What, then, is 'action'? As we shall see later, Arendt's account of action in *politics* contains very considerable complexities. In *The Human Condition*, however, she is chiefly concerned with action as a basic human capacity, and at this level it is not too difficult to say what it is. It is a very broad category of human activity that covers interactions with other people that are not matters of routine behaviour but require personal initiative. However intelligible they may be in retrospect, actions are unpredictable before the event. Thus, jumping into a river to rescue someone is action, going to work is usually not.¹²¹

As a general category of human activity, action is closely related to speech, and Arendt often talks about speech and action in the same breath, as phenomena that arise from human plurality and disclose the uniqueness of each individual.¹²² It is because we are all different that we can converse together rather than sound in chorus like sheep, and action seems to Arendt to arise out of this same feature of the human condition. Speech and action are not identical, however, and, as we shall see, their relationship in politics was a matter of great interest to her. She observes that each tends to reveal a different side of human plurality. Speech is particularly well fitted to disclose the unique individual who is speaking, whereas action has a particularly close affinity with beginning, natality. The two overlap, however. Speech is presumably the wider category, since we do a great deal of talking that could not be regarded as action – social chat, for instance. Conversely, not all actions involve speech: for example, diving in to save the drowning swimmer, or Billy Budd's felling of Claggart, discussed in *On Revolution*. But since action as Arendt understands it is essentially *interaction*, directed towards and related to other persons, it is natural that 'many, and even most acts, are performed in the manner of speech'.¹²³

Although her emphasis on individuals and on action carries echoes of the existentialist milieu from which she came,¹²⁴ this is a connection that should be treated with caution, not only because she distanced herself from any such categorisation but because the fundamental feature of her thought is her emphasis on human *plurality*. In contrast to numerous more or less 'existentialist' early twentieth-century thinkers who wrote about the claims of 'the individual', Arendt's central point is the obvious though neglected

¹²¹ Cf. Parekh, *Hannah Arendt* 114. ¹²² *HC* 175–6.

¹²³ *HC* 178. The American Declaration of Independence, for example, is 'the perfect way for an action to appear in words' (*OR* 130). When we discuss Arendt's views on the relation between *thought* and action in chapter 7 below, we shall see that she believed that *logos* as originally understood by the Greeks had been a kind of speech that united thought and action.

¹²⁴ M. Jay, 'The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt' in Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986) 237–56. Cf. Hinchman and Hinchman, 'Existentialism Politicized'.

one that human affairs go on among a multiplicity of individuals who are all distinct and who are constantly replacing their predecessors. As a result each person's doings are entangled with others' in 'the web of relationships'.¹²⁵

As each new person grows up and begins to interact and speak with others, his or her actions and projects affect and are affected by those of others. As a result, no one, however dynamic, can ever be in control of the events of his life. This produces a peculiar combination of form and formlessness in human life. Because human affairs go on among individuals who are vividly distinct, they can after the event be turned into stories that have *dramatis personae* and appear to have form and meaning. Only *after* the event, however: no one can predict the end of the story while it is still going on, and the 'hero' of the story certainly cannot dictate its form. These observations about stories are directed toward familiar ways of thinking about politics, particularly against the modern conception of history as a single story with a plot that can be discovered and foretold.¹²⁶ This version of history, which seemed to Arendt to be so closely connected with totalitarianism and all the features of modernity she feared most, can hold only where human beings 'behave' instead of acting, and lose their individuality in a single, 'social' subject.¹²⁷ While they retain their specifically human qualities there can be no single subject, 'mankind', whose story could be told even in retrospect, let alone predicted in advance.

This radical unpredictability of human action is only one of the many ways in which, as Arendt emphasises, the most characteristically human of activities is also the most frustrating. Acting and speaking are not things that one individual can do by himself – even the most charismatic of heroes can only be a leader if he can attract followers – and as a result action has severe disadvantages compared with fabrication. Unlike the worker who makes something, the man who acts cannot control the results of his action. He can start projects, but he cannot control their effects, which become hopelessly entangled with the effects of others' actions and reactions. Only when it is too late will he know what he has done.¹²⁸

Besides being unsatisfactory, action can be positively dangerous: its restless initiatives continually threaten the stability of the human world, because these initiatives continually set off processes which are boundless and irreversible.¹²⁹ As we saw in the previous chapter when looking at her reflections on totalitarianism and the atom bomb, Arendt blamed the modern predicament not only on the rise of labour to public prominence, but also on the *actions* of politicians and scientists who had in the manner of the sorcerer's apprentice let loose processes which no one could control. In

¹²⁵ HC181. ¹²⁶ HC184–6. ¹²⁷ HC43. ¹²⁸ HC188–92. ¹²⁹ HC191, 232.

her essay on 'Ideology and Terror', deploring the mistaken conception of 'laws' of nature or history that had led the totalitarians to worship as inevitable the automatic processes they were themselves letting loose, she had stressed what she saw as the proper function of human laws, namely to act as fences to guard the stability of the human world against the anarchic capacity for initiative of each new person born into it.¹³⁰ In other words, something that exercised her mind from the beginning was the tension between the human capacity for action on the one hand and the need for a stable human order on the other.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to read *The Human Condition* as an unqualified paean of praise for action. Arendt stresses its drawbacks – unpredictability, irreversibility and the inability of any single actor to keep control over his own strand in the web of human affairs – and remarks that the attempts by philosophers and by politicians ever since ancient times to escape from the frustrations inherent in human plurality are not in the least surprising. These attempts 'always amount to seeking shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end'.¹³¹ In other words, they amount to a 'substitution of making for acting', and particularly of *rule* by one person for free politics that allows a multitude of citizens to act. We shall be looking later at this contrast between government and politics, and also at Arendt's account of why philosophers in particular should have been drawn to it.

Our account so far perhaps explains why, in Arendt's view, the human capacity for action is something that theorists neglect at their peril. But her purpose in *The Human Condition* goes beyond providing a corrective for traditional and modern omissions and emphases. Action is not just one among many features of the human condition, to be taken into account with its various advantages and disadvantages; in her view, as she makes quite clear, it holds 'the highest rank in the hierarchy of the *vita activa*',¹³² and we must now consider why this should be so. The key to this comes in the very first section of the chapter on 'Action', on 'The Disclosure of the Agent in Speech and Action', in which Arendt explicates the plurality of human beings by talking about the way in which we reveal our distinctness in our interactions with others. Human existence as a distinct person is not just a matter of being born into a particular body, but of speaking and acting in relation to others. Unlike animals, whose grunts and behaviour patterns are characteristic of a whole species, individual human beings say things and do things that belong to them alone, and thereby identify themselves as distinct persons. The mistaken understandings of politics

¹³⁰ 'Ideology and Terror' 465.

¹³¹ HC 220.

¹³² HC 205.

which she opposed had been unanimous in overlooking ‘the inevitability with which men disclose themselves as subjects, as distinct and unique persons’,¹³³

We saw earlier when discussing ‘The Public Realm’ how Arendt’s belief that plural men open up amongst them a space in which reality can appear and be seen from all sides has its roots in the philosophy of Heidegger, if of a Heidegger transformed for her own purposes. In her chapter on ‘Action’, however, the focus of her attention is rather different, concerned not so much with the opportunity this space offers for reality in general to appear and be experienced, but rather with its vital role in confirming the reality of each individual mortal. Human beings need to act and speak in the presence of their fellows in order to affirm their own reality.

Without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt. The human sense of reality demands that men actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow.¹³⁴

In this quotation it is easy to hear the echoes of Arendt’s reaction to Nazism. Having followed her analysis of totalitarianism as a movement that crushed all individuality and responsibility, in which victims were reduced to passive beasts and lost in ‘holes of oblivion’, and in which even the rulers regarded themselves only as the anonymous executors of inhuman laws, Arendt’s passionate stress on initiative and identity is not surprising. But we have been talking so far about self-disclosure in action and speech as a general feature of the human condition, without any special reference to politics (except for the point that political thinking which ignores this phenomenon will be misleading). Thus far, indeed, we might not expect self-disclosure to have any particular connection with politics, since, like action and speech, it appears to be a feature of *any* human life. At this point, however, ambiguities and difficulties appear, as it becomes evident not only that there is in Arendt’s eyes a special link between politics and self-disclosure,¹³⁵ but also that this applies only to special cases of politics itself. As we explore her theory, the action and self-disclosure that apparently started as general human capacities seem to be narrowed down until they become rare human achievements. ‘All men are capable of deed and word’, but most of them do not inhabit a ‘space of appearance’ in which they would be able to manifest that capacity, and most of them are therefore

¹³³ HC 183.

¹³⁴ HC 208.

¹³⁵ ‘Because he wants to appear, to manifest himself, man is a political being’, ‘Philosophy and Politics: What is Political Philosophy?’ (1969) MSS Box 40 024439.

'deprived of reality'. Those who live their lives in this shadowy way without ever fully affirming their identity seem to include the vast majority of the human race. Those Arendt specifically mentions are 'the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity . . . the laborer or craftsman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world'.¹³⁶ For although one cannot suppose that all of these get through their lives without engaging in speech and action, it seems that it is not just *any* gathering of human beings that will do as a place in which to act and speak and disclose one's identity. 'Action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.'¹³⁷

Only on the public stage, which Arendt usually identifies with free politics, can human beings fully realise their identity as individuals, and since she strongly implies in *The Human Condition* that this realisation is the highest human achievement, it seems to follow that the point of politics ought to be to provide the opportunity for such realisation. Underlying the formal constitution of the body politic is the 'space of appearance', while the function of political power is to keep that space in being. This reading is supported by Arendt's apparently favourable references to Athenian democracy, in which, by her account, the polis was understood as a kind of institutionalised version of the space of appearance provided for Homeric heroes by the Trojan War. In Athens, every citizen had the chance to be a hero, while the city provided an 'organized remembrance' to save his deeds from oblivion in case no Homer should be on hand.¹³⁸

Not surprisingly, Arendt's account of action as self-disclosure and her references to Periclean Athens are among the best-known aspects of her thought, seized upon by supporters and critics alike.¹³⁹ Throughout the debate over the merits or otherwise of Arendt's views, however, it has been generally assumed that the *content* of those views is fairly unproblematic: that we all know what her theory of action in politics is, and that it finds its classic expression in *The Human Condition*. Interestingly enough, however, this fundamental assumption is called into question by study of her unpublished lectures, which tell a very different story. As we shall see, the impression that emerges is that her thinking about action in politics was much more complex and open-ended than one might suppose from reading the book in isolation, and that rather than having a simple and clear-cut theory she was wrestling over a considerable period with diverse strands of thought. Let us now examine these complexities.

¹³⁶ HC 199. ¹³⁷ HC 180. ¹³⁸ HC 197–200, 205.

¹³⁹ For one sceptical viewpoint, see B. Campbell, 'Paradigms Lost: Classical Athenian Politics in Modern Myth', *History of Political Thought* 10/2 (Summer 1989) 189–213.

The complexities of Arendt's account of action

The first surprise in store for the reader who comes from *The Human Condition* to the lectures in which Arendt worked out her ideas over many years concerns the things she says about the place of action in the Greek polis. The expectations of such a reader would probably accord with James Knauer's statement that 'for Arendt the city-state is the original instance of the "right-ordering" of the life of action'.¹⁴⁰ It is generally taken for granted that Athenian democracy was her working model of what action means, and the tone in which she speaks of Athens in *The Human Condition* is certainly consistent with this interpretation.¹⁴¹ It is therefore quite a shock to read her manuscript lectures and to find a very different account. Not that it would be surprising to find an author writing something in a draft which she then rejected in the published version of a book. What is unusual about this particular case is that Arendt's unexpected comments on action and the polis are consistent through several manuscripts written before and after *The Human Condition*, but are at odds with the usual reading of the book itself.

The most substantial source is a set of manuscript lectures that we have already had occasion to consult when we looked at Arendt's reflection on Marxism, namely the lectures she gave in 1953 at Princeton on 'Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought'.¹⁴² Arendt claims in those lectures that the philosophical tradition coming down from Plato systematically ignored several crucial political experiences, including the Greek experience of action; and the interesting thing about this is that while, unsurprisingly, she takes 'action' to mean beginning, taking the initiative, embarking on an enterprise, she says that this was an experience characteristic of the Homeric age in Greece and specifically *not* of the polis. Action was linked not with democracy but with 'kingship' (by which Arendt means the leadership of the Homeric *primus inter pares*, not despotism). 'Kingship, probably the oldest, and perhaps the most elementarily political form of organization, rests on the experience of action in the general sense of beginning something new, starting on a new enterprise together.'¹⁴³ This Homeric action was inspired by the thirst for immortal fame, was highly anarchic and of course consisted mainly of warfare. In the polis, on the contrary, pure action no longer had much place except in time of war.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ J.T. Knauer, 'Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action', *American Political Science Review* 74/3 (September 1980) 722.

¹⁴¹ HC 197-8. ¹⁴² MSS Box 64, two drafts.

¹⁴³ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section III, 41.

¹⁴⁴ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 2a, 5; (2nd draft) section III 43-4.

The implication of this and similar passages in other manuscripts appears to be that at this stage of her reflections, 'action, properly speaking (i.e. not execution of laws or application of rules or any other managing activity, but the beginning of something new whose outcome is unpredictable)¹⁴⁵ seemed to her something that was really too anarchic to be fully compatible with any settled political structure, and that even as hectic a democracy as the Greek polis required that its citizens give up action for the sake of stable communal life.¹⁴⁶ A further implication of this is that what she sees as one of the characteristic deformations of the Western tradition of political thought actually dates back to Athens itself. Since 'in the Greek polis . . . the experience of action in the sense of starting an enterprise and seeing it through to its end was no longer the central political factor', whereas giving orders to slaves was,¹⁴⁷ the Athenians lost the authentic understanding of action. When Plato established *rule* over subjects rather than leadership of companions as the central category of politics, he was actually articulating the experience of the polis itself. 'Polis is where people *live* together, not act.[Sic] This is the reason why action plays such a minor role in ancient philosophy which speaks out of the polis-experience.'¹⁴⁸

Although the sources so far cited date from before *The Human Condition*, other unpublished works contemporary with and later than the book say the same thing. For example, a manuscript from 1963, five years after the book's publication, says unambiguously that 'with the rise of the city-state: Action loses its importance, in its stand [Sic] comes speech'.¹⁴⁹

Three particularly important points relevant to the interpretation of Arendt's theory of action emerge from the study of her unpublished work:

(1) When Arendt looked for a paradigm of action in Greek antiquity, she turned in the first instance not to the Athenian polis but to the warlike deeds of the Homeric kings, and made a distinction between their 'action' and Athenian speech.

(2) Not only do we find that Athens is not, as we might expect, the classic locus of action: we also discover that Arendt was prepared to be highly critical of the Athenian concern with self-disclosure and glory. She observes, for example, that in the Athenian polis 'life consisted in an intense and uninterrupted contest of all against all', and speaks of 'this agonal spirit, which . . . poisoned the domestic life of the citizens with envy and

¹⁴⁵ 'Concern with Politics' 023248.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section III, 26, 44.

¹⁴⁷ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023369.

¹⁴⁸ 'Lectures on the History of Political Theory' (1955) Boxes 40-1 024084.

¹⁴⁹ 'Introduction into Politics' (1963) MSS Box 41, 023836. This point is expanded in another manuscript dating from about the same time as *The Human Condition*: 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' 09.

mutual hatred'. It was, she says, this 'reckless individualism' that 'eventually brought the polis to its doom'.¹⁵⁰

(3) Also, and perhaps even more interesting, the actions of the Homeric heroes appear in the manuscripts alongside and on equal terms with two other experiences of the human ability to start things that traditional political philosophy failed to articulate. One of these is the classic experience of founding a body politic with the authority to endure over time, achieved by the Romans, 'the political people par excellence'.¹⁵¹ The other and much more unexpected case Arendt cites is the Christian experience of drawing a line under past events by means of forgiveness, enabling people to make a new start in their relations with one another.¹⁵²

What are we to make of all this? I think that once we are aware of this additional evidence we have to abandon the conventional picture of Arendt judging modern politics in the light of a straightforward and unambiguous theory of action derived chiefly from an idealisation of Athens. It seems clear that what she was doing was something more complicated and less easy to grasp, although what we have previously seen of her general manner of thinking should give us some help. The crucial point is her habit of following *trains* of thought. Although action is often taken to be a subject on which she had a cut-and-dried theory, it is in fact one of the most dynamic areas of her thought. We need to be particularly careful not to read *The Human Condition* as the sole authoritative source for her views, for it is actually only one layer in her reflections (and one, moreover, in which Heideggerian concerns with 'disclosure' were particularly prominent). Students of her work have drawn attention to differences between the 'agonal and highly individualistic view of politics' which they found in it and the stress on co-operative participation in public affairs characteristic of her later writings.¹⁵³ Rather than regarding this as evidence either of inconsistency or of a change of mind, however, I think that we can most profitably read the relevant sections of *The Human Condition* as one among several partial solutions to problems she was concerned with from at least the early 1950s and with which she wrestled over many years.

One source of complexity is that 'action' is at the centre of a web formed by the interaction of several trains of thought besides the obvious one about its differences from labour and work. One of these, leading her to stress self-disclosure in action, proceeds from reflections in the wake of Nazism on

¹⁵⁰ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023401 (*Social Research* (1990) 82); 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section III 44.

¹⁵¹ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1969) 024448.

¹⁵² 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section III 23.

¹⁵³ Parekh, *Hannah Arendt* 177; Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 7, 43; P. Fuss, 'Hannah Arendt's Conception of Political Community' in M. A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1979) 171-2.

Heidegger's notions about the disclosure of Being. Another has to do with worries about nuclear bombs, economic development and men's ability to set off chains of events which they cannot control. Yet another, which we shall be investigating in a later chapter, is concerned with reflections on Montesquieu and the characteristic 'principles' of different kinds of political bodies. Lying as it does at the centre of a web of thought, Arendt's concept of 'action' is subject to a variety of intellectual tensions of which we need to be aware. But we will perhaps be best able to discover what she was up to if we stand back for a moment and consider *why* it seemed important to her to think about action.

The sources of her interest are not mysterious. She lived through times in which there was plenty of dramatic action to think about, and in the midst of events that seemed to demand action even from the naturally passive. Her interventions in Jewish politics during the Second World War continually call on Jews to *do* things instead of suffering the course of history as victims, and the establishment in Palestine first of a Jewish homeland and then of the state of Israel was, with all its dangers and drawbacks, a demonstration of the capacity human beings have to take matters into their own hands and to call new political circumstances into being. Her husband, with his early experiences in the Spartacist uprising, was a continual reminder of the possibility and unpredictable course of revolutionary action. Finally (but perhaps most importantly), in the face of the double threats of totalitarianism and nuclear war, she cherished as a talisman the capacity of human beings to do the miraculously unforeseeable, to act together to make a new beginning.¹⁵⁴ In other words, her interest in action was not (as some of her critics have thought) an irresponsible desire to upset the even tenor of representative democracy for the sake of the kicks to be got out of participation, but a serious response to dramatic and tragic events.

She was by no means alone in emerging from these twentieth-century experiences of war, revolution and general upheaval with action on her intellectual agenda: this was a preoccupation that she shared with other thinkers in the existentialist tradition, notably Sartre and Camus.¹⁵⁵ Among the concerns of the time was the reminder that even in the most apparently hopeless circumstances individuals may always be able to do something, and therefore that they cannot hide from responsibility. Other common themes, evoked by the association of action with situations of crisis, were the indispensability of courage, the value of heroism, the importance of preserving the memory of those who fall, amounting in

¹⁵⁴ 'Freedom and Politics' in A. Hunold (ed.), *Freedom and Serfdom* (Dordrecht, Reidel, 1961) 213-17; 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' 003-4.

¹⁵⁵ 'Concern with Politics' 0233254-023256.

combination to a revival of anti-materialist, epic and tragic values. We shall have occasion later to consider the importance of this mood and setting for Arendt's political thought. For the moment, what is important is that the possibilities, demands and dangers of action in situations of political crisis were powerfully present to Arendt's mind while she was writing about totalitarianism. We have seen that, in looking for the sources of Marx's contribution to totalitarianism, she found it necessary to disentangle action from work and labour, and how, in the course of doing so, she discovered that classic experiences of the capacity for action had been neglected within the great tradition of political philosophy.

Hence her attempt to rethink political theory, taking account of experiences recovered from the past. But it is important to be clear about what was involved in this enterprise, for there is a great deal more to it than the traditional German homesickness for ancient Greece. Arendt does not simply hold up before a degenerate modern world an ideal picture of Athens or of Achilles. While she does indeed make use (in a highly selective way) of the past, the use she makes of it is a great deal more subtle than that. For one thing, as we have seen, the remote past to which she appeals is not just a Greek past, but also a Roman and Christian one as well. What is more important, however, is that her appeal is *mediated*, not direct: it is not a matter of trying to revive ancient forms, but of using forgotten experiences as a source of enlightenment about fundamental human capacities. The recovery of these experiences provides the raw material for political reflection rather than supplying the answers themselves. In the remainder of this section, we shall try to trace some of her reflections on these elementary experiences of action.

For a person of Arendt's education and intellectual background, thinking about heroic action meant in the first instance thinking about Homer, and particularly about Achilles and all that he represented. Since there were in the first half of the twentieth century plenty of people who were disposed to revive the heroic values of the epic tradition, and who found themselves as a result drawn to versions of fascism, it is important to realise that Homer lies at the *beginning*, not at the end of one of Arendt's trains of thought.¹⁵⁶ Meditating on the Homeric model of heroic action, Arendt finds ways in which it was modified and politicised, in the first place by interpreting it in terms of plurality rather than individualism, and in the second place by disconnecting it from violence.

The stress on plurality is the most obviously distinctive feature of her

¹⁵⁶ For an attempt to read Arendt's political thought as a resurrection of Homeric values, see S. Dossa, *The Public Realm and the Public Self: the Political Theory of Hannah Arendt* (Waterloo, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989) 36–41.

interpretation of action. Among the many early-twentieth-century intellectuals who shared her sympathy with heroic values, most thought in terms either of lonely individuals or of dominant supermen, and it is highly characteristic of Arendt that when she looks back to the exploits of Homer's heroes, what strikes her is not only their courage and initiative but also their dependence upon their fellows. It is in this context that we should read her many-times-repeated account of the classical etymology of action. She tells us that Greek and Latin each possessed two verbs meaning 'to act', one of them meaning to start and the other to carry through: *archein* and *prattein*, *agere* and *gerere*.¹⁵⁷ In each case it was the verb referring to the second part of the activity that came into predominant use, whereas the first came to mean 'rule' or 'lead'. While one of her purposes in drawing attention to this is of course to emphasise the element of *beginning* in action, another is to insist that no leader, however heroic, can act by himself, and that those who carry through initiatives need not be merely passive subjects of rule, but can themselves be participants in action, and must in any case join in responsibility for what they carry out.

Language itself, then, that repository of forgotten experience, seemed to bear out her claim that the most elementary experiences of action had been plural: the Homeric epic was a collective enterprise. What was undeniable, however, was that it was a collective enterprise in *violence*, and that most of the examples of heroic action that were familiar in her own time were also entangled with violence, the stuff of war and revolution. As a result, one of the most persistent themes of her thinking about action, a theme that echoes in many variations through her work, is the question of how far action and violence can be detached from one another. Her reflections on the subject are extremely complex, and we shall encounter different aspects of them later, particularly in connection with her views on politics and morals and on the nature of power. We are concerned in the present section, however, with her thinking about the more fundamental question of what action in politics can mean, and whether the action that is so vitally important for politics is also in some ways incompatible with it.

It is possible to identify three strands of thought here, connected with three different models of action and of non-violent politics, and although the roots of all three lie far back in her thought, it may not be altogether misleading to identify them to some extent with chronological stages in her reflections, concerned successively with Homer and the Athenian polis, with Rome and revolution, and with Christianity and the Civil Rights movement.

¹⁵⁷ HC 189; 'What is Freedom?', *Between Past and Future* 165.

Homer and the polis

As we have seen, when Arendt turned to the past for a paradigm of action that had been ignored or suppressed by the great tradition of political philosophy, the first model to which she turned was that of the Homeric hero, who leaves his ordinary life in order to embark upon a great enterprise and to distinguish himself by great deeds. The interesting thing about this model is that although it displays to the full the heroic qualities of action, it is violent, anarchic, disruptive and (of course) thoroughly *unpolitical*. In a sense, therefore, the transition from the Homeric age to the age of the polis involved a clear shift from anarchic enterprise to stable institutions, from a life of violence to peaceful relations between citizens, from deeds to words, and, as we have seen, Arendt frequently described the transition in just such terms.

This is only the beginning of the story, however, for it is clear that Arendt's attention was caught by the idea that the Greece of Pericles was not simply the opposite of the Greece of Achilles, but was in a sense (as, she claims, Pericles himself believed)¹⁵⁸ its continuation by other means. Her argument is that the most notable feature of heroic action was not the violence of the hero's deeds but the glory attending the disclosure of the individual in action, a glory made possible only by the existence of an audience to witness the deeds and a poet to make sure they are remembered. The hero, in other words, not only needs companions to set out on the enterprise in the first place, but needs a public space in which to attain splendour and fame. This means that even the most epic action is inseparable from speech, which relates the hero to his fellows. Even Achilles was 'the speaker of great words' as well as 'the doer of great deeds':¹⁵⁹ furthermore, (since deeds and speeches are insubstantial and fleeting) it was in their repeated telling by his companions and successors that his deeds lived on. The Greek word *doxa* (Arendt points out) meant 'splendour or fame' and also 'opinion'.¹⁶⁰

Consequently, although in a sense the historical development from Homeric kingship to the Athenian polis involved a genuine shift in experience from warriors' deeds to citizens' words, this was a shift along a continuum:¹⁶¹ the heroic ideal of the disclosure of the unique individual was preserved, but translated into the form of disclosure via non-violent speech. '*doxa* . . . becomes more and more an opinion by which the citizen distinguishes himself in the constant activity of *politeuesthai* and less the shining glory of immortal fame which may follow the great deed'.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ HC 197. ¹⁵⁹ HC 25.

¹⁶⁰ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023399 (*Social Research* (1990) 80).

¹⁶¹ 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' 07.

¹⁶² 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section III 41.

Arendt maintains that this partial incorporation of heroic action into political speech was possible because the Greeks did not in any case distinguish sharply between speech, action and thought. *Logos*, speech, was the meeting point which united action and thought, giving objective and memorable form both to hidden ideas and to fleeting deeds, and therefore containing within itself 'the whole meaningfulness of human existence'.¹⁶³

It therefore seemed to Arendt that 'politics' as originally invented in the Greek polis, continual talk among the citizens, provided one model of the way in which the human capacity for action could be to some extent tamed and made manageable, and in which human distinctiveness and spontaneity could find a stable institutional form. Notwithstanding her romantic sympathy with Athens, she was perfectly well aware of the drawbacks of this solution, and prepared to admit that the non-violent public space within which the citizens moved was not only a small clearing in a world of slavery and total war, but was itself poisoned by the acute competitiveness in which the Homeric spirit lived on.¹⁶⁴ While she certainly believed that it represented a unique experience which political theorists ought to recover and learn from, she did not regard it as the only such source of precious but neglected experience. Let us turn now to the second of her paradigms, Rome.

Rome and revolution

When Arendt drew attention to the elementary experiences of the human capacity for beginning that had been neglected by the great tradition of political philosophy, she habitually listed alongside Homeric action the founding and handing down of the city of Rome. Like the expedition against Troy, this was also an adventure, a great enterprise, but here the stress was less on self-disclosure, more on calling into being something that had not previously existed; less on agonistic individualism, more on acting with one's equals in bonds of mutual trust. Rome, with its foundation of an eternal city built on alliances and mutual promises, its pious respect for tradition, its exaltation of public spirit in the place of Greek competitiveness, was in some ways a better political model than Athens, although it had its own drawbacks. The Romans had been too lacking in the sparkling creativity of the quarrelsome Athenians to be able to articulate their own political discoveries (Arendt admitted that she never managed to feel the enthusiasm for them that she did for the Greeks)¹⁶⁵ but if they had done so,

¹⁶³ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023365.

¹⁶⁴ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023401 (*Social Research* (1990) 82); 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section III 44.

¹⁶⁵ 'I like Greek antiquity but I never liked Roman antiquity.' 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' in Hill, *Hannah Arendt* 330; Cf. 'On the Human Condition' in A.M. Hilton (ed.), *The Evolving Society* (New York, Institute of Cybernetical Research, 1966) 216.

they would have come up against the problem that faced later Founding Fathers: how can the act of beginning itself be preserved?¹⁶⁶

Reflections on Roman action-as-foundation were already present to Arendt's mind in 1956 when her attention was caught by a decisive event, the popular overthrow of the communist regime in Hungary, swiftly reversed by invading Soviet troops. In spite of its failure, this was 'a true event whose stature will not depend upon victory or defeat; its greatness is secure in the tragedy it enacted.'¹⁶⁷ As a shining example of free political action, it seemed to vindicate Arendt's attempts to recover authentic political experiences from the distortions of philosophical tradition and modern society. All of the various forgotten aspects of action could be found in it. It was, in the first place, decisively a case of *beginning*, starting something new. It was as totally unexpected as a Christian miracle, a new and memorable enterprise to match those of ancient heroes. It was also, overwhelmingly, a *collective* enterprise worthy of ancient citizens: 'what carried the revolution was the sheer momentum of acting-together of the whole people . . .',¹⁶⁸ while (unlike most of those ancient activities) it was marred by little violence. Furthermore, even in the brief space of time permitted them the Hungarians showed a truly Roman capacity for the foundation of political institutions. As soon as they had liberated themselves they began immediately and spontaneously to secure their freedom by establishing a plethora of revolutionary councils, which had already begun to federate into a republican structure when the tanks rolled in.¹⁶⁹ Here was a genuine contemporary example embodying all the facets of political action that had seemed submerged beneath the philosophers' tradition and the modern preoccupation with social matters. For 'this sudden uprising of an oppressed people for the sake of freedom and hardly anything else'¹⁷⁰ was in Arendt's view a *political* revolution, not one concerned with social betterment.

The experience seemed to her to have enormous significance for political theory. 'Events, past and present . . . are the true, the only reliable teachers of political scientists . . . Once such an event as the spontaneous uprising in Hungary has happened, every policy, theory and forecast of future potentialities needs re-examination.'¹⁷¹ This is not to say that her political thought changed abruptly after 1956.¹⁷² As we have seen, it was precisely because she had already been engaged in reflections on political action that

¹⁶⁶ OR 232.

¹⁶⁷ 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution', *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edition (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1958) 480. ¹⁶⁸ 'Epilogue' 496.

¹⁶⁹ 'Epilogue' 500. ¹⁷⁰ 'Epilogue' 482. ¹⁷¹ 'Epilogue' 482.

¹⁷² Note that *The Human Condition* consists largely of Arendt's Walgreen Lectures, which were delivered at Chicago University in the spring of 1956, before the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution.

she was able to interpret the significance of the Hungarian Revolution as she did. What the experience did do, however, was to focus her attention more specifically upon *revolution*, that 'new experience which revealed man's capacity for novelty',¹⁷³ as the paradigm case of political action in the modern world, and to set her thinking about action and freedom in revolutions as well as in relation to her earlier models. As she put it in one of the essays that marked this train of thought, 'revolutions have been the time-space where action with all its implications was . . . re-discovered for the modern age'.¹⁷⁴

In these reflections, the Hungarian Revolution was quickly joined and overshadowed by the American. Arendt had been interested in the Founding Fathers since at least 1955,¹⁷⁵ and a happy coincidence now enabled her to develop this interest. In 1958, when she was preparing *The Human Condition* for publication and had worked out her interpretation of the Hungarian Revolution, she was invited to go to Princeton the following year to lecture in the Department of American History and Civilisation.¹⁷⁶ The result was *On Revolution*, in which her new thought train about revolution, action and freedom was interwoven with the multiple strands arising out of her reflections on Marxist totalitarianism into a rich and baffling tapestry. Where action is concerned, the lessons of ancient and more recent history are combined in that work. We find Arendt speaking of the Pilgrim Fathers (in terms that echo her account of Homeric Greece) as discovering 'the elementary grammar of political action' when they decided 'to venture forth into an enterprise entirely of their own';¹⁷⁷ of the Founding Fathers repeating the Roman miracle of establishing a durable republic by the power of mutual promise, and in the process rediscovering the joy of self-disclosure in politics that the Athenians had known. The political *problem* confronting revolutionaries (vastly complicated by the advent of modern social questions) is, as presented by Arendt, a variation on the Greek problem to which the Athenian polis was a solution: given that action is a matter of *beginning*, making a fresh start, how can action be translated into institutions, and how can it avoid violence?

These are questions that we shall be pursuing at a later stage. For the present, we need to note that Arendt's reflections on revolution represent a further stage in her thinking about action and politics, a richer mix than appears in *The Human Condition*. But although revolution evidently represented for her another model of the politics of action (though not, in

¹⁷³ OR 34.

¹⁷⁴ 'Action and the Pursuit of Happiness' in *Politische Ordnung und menschliche Existenz: Festgabe für Eric Voegelin* (Munich, Beck, 1962) 16. See also 'Freedom and Politics' in Hunold, *Freedom and Serfdom*; 'What is Freedom?', *Between Past and Future*.

¹⁷⁵ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 294.

¹⁷⁶ Arendt to Jaspers, 17 January 1958 *Briefwechsel* 377.

¹⁷⁷ OR 173.

view of the historic record, a very encouraging one) it did not exhaust the possibilities.

Christianity and non-violent action

Running through all Arendt's writings on action is another thread of reflection that may seem very distant indeed from her meditations on Homeric heroes, Athenian citizens, Roman *patres* and Founding Fathers. We saw that one of the chief impulses leading her to stress the possibility of action and to set out to recover and articulate human experiences of beginning arose directly out of her own experience. Faced on the one hand with totalitarian submission to inexorable processes and on the other by the apparently unstoppable momentum of nuclear technology, she believed that the only hope for humanity lay in our capacity to do the unexpected, to break the chain of events, to begin anew, to join with others to make a fresh start. As she put it in an essay on 'Freedom and Politics' published in 1961, 'on human freedom, on man's ability to fend off the disaster which advances like an automaton and seems therefore inevitable, on man's ability to implement the "infinitely improbable" and transform it into a reality, may well depend . . . the survival on earth of the human race'.¹⁷⁸

Action, in other words, is not only the mode in which human beings disclose their unique individuality and triumph over death, as the Greeks had known; nor is it only the capacity to join together and found 'lasting institutions'¹⁷⁹ as the Romans had known and some revolutionaries had rediscovered: it is also 'the one miracle-working faculty of man'¹⁸⁰ a discovery which she attributed to Jesus of Nazareth. The paradigm of miraculous action which she finds in early Christianity is the act of forgiveness, which can put an end to an injury, break its potentially boundless chain of consequences and enable its perpetrator to start afresh.¹⁸¹ More generally, however, the Christian assertion of the possibility of working miracles (which she detached from its theological context) seemed to her to articulate a truth about politics that all orthodox political theory ignored, namely the capacity of human beings to do the utterly unexpected, sometimes to great political effect. The power that can be generated by the apparently powerless is an important aspect of this. In the case, for example, of Gandhi and his followers in India,¹⁸² a few apparently helpless individuals mounted an unlikely challenge to an overwhelmingly powerful political order, and, against all the odds, generated the power to change it.

¹⁷⁸ 'Freedom and Politics' in Hunold, *Freedom and Serfdom* 216–17.

¹⁷⁹ *OR* 84. ¹⁸⁰ *HC* 246.

¹⁸¹ *HC* 236–43. ¹⁸² 'On Violence' 152.

As Arendt was well aware, there are problems in adapting Christian insights to political purposes, even when those Christian insights have been detached from traditional theology and institutions, and we shall need to look at some of those problems in due course. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of non-violent, religiously inspired action provided her with a model of another aspect of the fundamental human capacities that seemed to have been ignored by orthodox political thinking. Although this is the least developed of her three trains of thought concerning action, it seems that the advent of the Civil Rights movement in the USA, followed by the anti-Vietnam War movement, appeared to her like practical proof that she was thinking along the right lines in exploring these obscure corners of experience.

Homeric heroics, Roman foundation, Christian miracle-working: what all these experiences have in common, and doubtless what led Arendt to list them all under the heading of 'action', is that they are all cases of beginning something in relationships between human beings and they are all manifestations of plurality: no one can forgive themselves or found a city on their own, and Homeric adventures were communal enterprises. That apart, there may not seem to be much common ground between the three cases – particularly between the activities of Homeric heroes and Christian saints. Looking back over the use Arendt makes of them, however, we can see that there is something all three have in common that is very important for the understanding of her theory of action in politics. For what is almost as striking as the differences between the three experiences is that *none of them is in itself a straightforward example of politics*. Homeric adventure is *prepolitical* and anarchic; Christian action is concerned with an essentially unworldly goodness – as Arendt put it once, 'Jesus knew what *action* is better than anybody else, he did not know what *institutions* are';¹⁸³ and even the Roman experience of foundation is a once-for-all affair that establishes a political world and leaves successive generations to carry it on rather than to repeat the experience of action.¹⁸⁴ Each of the three cases seemed to Arendt to reveal in paradigm form human capacities that have immense significance for politics, while the Athenian polis, modern revolutions and non-violent demonstrations showed some of the ways in which they could be given political form. Nevertheless, even these practical translations of action into politics are rare exceptions, which could hardly form the bread-and-butter of what we ordinarily understand by 'politics'.

As we follow these trains of thought we may perhaps find it easier to understand another puzzling feature of Arendt's theory of action: how it is

¹⁸³ 'Remarks' to the American Society of Christian Ethics (1973) MSS Box 70 011838.

¹⁸⁴ For Arendt's reflections on similar problems to do with the American Revolution, see *OR* 232.

that, by her account, action is both so common and so rare. As her critics have pointed out, she says that action is a capacity all human beings possess, and one that lies at the root of politics, and yet she also maintains that in most of the political systems that have ever existed this capacity has been repressed in favour of government and obedience, and that the political spaces in which action has flourished have been very rare. Recalling Kant's reflections on the 'unsocial sociability' of mankind,¹⁸⁵ we might perhaps say that action as understood by Arendt is an 'unpolitical political' capacity, which drives men in the direction of politics but also makes it very difficult for them to get there. The impulse to take initiatives drives them to politics partly because they need the co-operation of others in their enterprises, and also because they want to be seen in action, and need a space of appearance in which to act and institutions to house that space. Such a space can only endure, however, if a balance can be struck between the disruptive, individualistic and violent tendencies of action on the one hand, and the tendency for institutions to become rigid and for the processes action sets off to become automatic on the other.

On the rare occasions when this balance is successfully struck and the dilemmas of action are solved for a little while, individual spontaneity is turned into a shared public condition and 'freedom' as Arendt understands it appears. 'The gift of freedom . . . the ability-to-initiate' which belongs to all human beings, turns into 'the state of being free' and becomes 'a concrete reality in the world', where human beings live in a community of equals, 'unfettered by despotism or serfdom' and where 'new beginnings are constantly injected into the stream of things already initiated'. But this 'state of being free . . . is destructible, . . . only seldom in history has it been able to unfold its full virtuosity'. What usually happens in human affairs is that 'action ceases and preservation of the status quo and administration start to function', while the processes already set in motion by the initiatives of action become automatic, like the processes of nature.¹⁸⁶ One of Arendt's purposes in writing about action was certainly to describe and recommend this experience of freedom, and Athens, with all its faults, was for her one of its rare historical examples. As we have seen, however, the focus of her attention was much less on praising Athens (let alone proposing to copy it) than on exploring the complexities and dilemmas of an area of human experience that had been strangely neglected in political thinking, but that had immense political significance: for while a successful

¹⁸⁵ *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. H. Reiss (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970) 44.

¹⁸⁶ 'Freedom and Politics' in Hunold, *Freedom and Serfdom* 215–6. Cf. 'What is Freedom?' 143–71; R. Beiner, 'Action, Natality and Citizenship: Hannah Arendt's Concept of Freedom' in Z. Pelczynski and J. Gray (ed.), *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy* (London, Athlone Press, 1984) 349–75.

resolution of the dilemmas of action may be very rare, action itself (for good and ill) is a permanent possibility in politics.

The 'state of being free' in which the human capacity for action achieves concrete fulfilment is rare partly because the internal dilemmas of action tend to destroy it, but even more because other human capacities tend to elbow action off the centre stage. Given the dangers and frustrations of action, there has always been a strong tendency to understand human interaction in the image of work, with one man in the position of maker and the rest relegated to the passivity of material for his operations. The tradition according to which politics is about governing rests on this kind of 'substitution of making for acting'.¹⁸⁷ Above all, however, action has always had to compete with labour for human attention. The precarious spaces of freedom enjoyed by groups of free men for short periods of human history were made possible only by the violence with which they forced slaves or serfs to cater for their material needs and leave them free to act, and although 'the rise of technology . . . has refuted the old and terrible truth that only violence and rule over others could make some men free',¹⁸⁸ that same rise of technology has not made free politics any more likely because, according to Arendt, it is part of the process that has brought labour and its priorities into the heart of politics itself. Further reflections upon this process occupy the final chapter of *The Human Condition*.

Alienation from the world and from the earth

If one of Arendt's purposes in *The Human Condition* was to focus attention on the potentialities and dangers of the human capacity to act, another was to explain why such a refocussing of attention was necessary. How could an activity so characteristic of human beings and so central to politics have been so neglected? Part of her answer was, of course, that the great tradition of thinking about politics was a *philosophers'* tradition, and that (for reasons which we shall be exploring in a later chapter) philosophy and politics tend not to be on good terms with one another. But it seemed to her that more was at stake than the malign influence of philosophers who rejected the uncertainties of action and preferred to model politics on work. Government understood as craftsmanship might be a recipe for tyranny, but not for totalitarianism. According to her analysis, totalitarian leaders saw themselves not as Promethean creators but as servants of inhuman forces, bearing no responsibility for the processes they set in motion. How, then, had this particular illusion arisen, and how had it come about that leaders thinking in this way had found so many followers prepared to

¹⁸⁷ HC 220–30.

¹⁸⁸ OR 114.

behave like mere specimens of an animal species? How was it, furthermore, that human beings had arrived at that other essential ingredient of totalitarianism, the belief that 'everything is possible'? For (and here Arendt returns to the theme sounded in the 'Prologue' with reflections on the exploration of space) although man is inevitably a 'conditioned' being, he has in modern times challenged the conditions under which life was given to him. How had modern man arrived at a position where, as space exploration showed, he was no longer bound to the earth, but was at the same time alienated from the human world? The purpose of her historical analysis was, she said, 'to trace back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self'.¹⁸⁹

It must be emphasised that according to Arendt, human beings in modern times are doubly alienated; they have lost a stable human world *and* have become detached from the natural earth as well. What they are left with is themselves and a pseudo-nature of their own devising – in other words, the combination of loneliness with slavery to inhuman 'laws' that she had analysed in 'Ideology and Terror'. It is 'world-alienation' that she looks at first in her chapter on the 'Modern Age' (by which she means the period from the seventeenth to the mid twentieth centuries), and this, as we saw when we looked at her reflections on Marx, is connected in her theory with modern economic development, and in particular with the replacement of property by capital, 'wealth'.

Part of what constituted a stable human world that could unite and separate people had always been the existence of private property in the sense of a specific place in the world belonging to each family. At the root of modern economic growth was the transformation of this stable, worldly property into fluid wealth,¹⁹⁰ and she traced this development to the Reformation, when the seizure of church property set off a general process of expropriation. Peasant property was turned into capital and peasants themselves into embodiments of sheer labour power with no place in the common world. This set off an unfettered process of production and consumption, 'the life process of society', which has eventually devoured the stable human world and turned its inhabitants into worldless, lonely mass men.¹⁹¹

But although the destruction of the human world by the life process of society is part of the story Arendt tells in the book, the main preoccupation

¹⁸⁹ HC 6. Cf. Ring, 'On Needing Both Marx and Arendt'.

¹⁹⁰ HC 61. Some of Arendt's commentators have pointed out that possession of this fluid wealth rather than worldly property was, of necessity, characteristic of Jews over many centuries, and that modern masses have come to share to some extent in the traditional Jewish condition. R.H. Feldman, 'Introduction' to *The Jew as Pariah* (New York: Grove Press, 1978) 42; D. Barley, 'Hannah Arendt; Die Judenfrage', *Zeitschrift für Politik* 35/2 (1988) 116. ¹⁹¹ HC 255–7.

of this final chapter is the circumstance that made possible both the totalitarian belief in omnipotence and the subjectivism of totalitarian ideology, namely the detachment from the *earth* implied by scientific discoveries, starting with Galileo's telescope which demonstrated that the earth goes round the sun. For the new science had in effect found Archimedes' point – a place to stand from which to look at the earth from the outside, and ultimately, perhaps, to move it as well.¹⁹² Human beings found themselves able to dominate nature, not just observing what nature revealed but extracting information through experiments, and, furthermore, subjecting it to the mathematical constructions of their own minds. This approach to nature from outside has in our own time led to the introduction of cosmic processes into earthly nature, and to the creation of new 'natural' substances.

While the nemesis attending this hubristic exercise was most obvious in the form of nuclear warfare, Arendt argued that the modern scientific enterprise had had costs right from the beginning. One of the very first implications of Galileo's new science was the rise of Cartesian doubt in philosophy. Before Descartes, the mainspring of philosophy had been 'the articulation of wonder'¹⁹³ at being as it revealed itself. But the first lesson of the new astronomy was that truth and reality do not reveal themselves to contemplation. To find the truth, it is necessary to lay experimental traps that force nature to reveal her secrets, and to trust to the truthfulness and reliability of scientists rather than of nature herself. Descartes worked out the philosophical implications of this new suspicion, doubting everything and relying only on his own mind. Corresponding to the new science's alienation from the earth, therefore, was an even more comprehensive alienation of philosophy from the world as well. The worldly objects that formerly stood over against individuals and appeared to all of them were dissolved into sensations experienced by individuals in the privacy of their own minds, and philosophers represented human beings as united by nothing but a common mental structure which ensured that each man's lonely reasonings must reach the same conclusion. Instead of being human beings sharing a common world, comparing their different perspectives upon it and so developing common sense, men were just 'animals who are able to reason'.¹⁹⁴

Arendt is suggesting, therefore, that the lonely mass men for whom (as she had argued) the logic of totalitarian ideologies was so compelling were foreshadowed in the theories of seventeenth-century philosophers such as Hobbes. Although the events of the twentieth century spread worldlessness and lack of common sense to unprecedented numbers of people, the

¹⁹² HC 264.

¹⁹³ HC 274.

¹⁹⁴ HC 284.

experiences themselves were traceable much further back, at any rate among philosophers, for whom loneliness is in any case a professional hazard.¹⁹⁵ To begin with, scientists busy using their newfound techniques to explore the universe did not share this desperate sense of being forced back upon their own minds, but Arendt is able to quote twentieth-century physicists to the effect that what science discovers in nature is, increasingly, what scientists put there themselves through the construction of their theories and experiments. The intellectual upshot of man's release from being earth-bound therefore seems to be that man is alienated from the world as well and driven back 'into the prison of his own mind'.¹⁹⁶

But what are the implications of all this for the standing of the different human activities analysed earlier in the book? As we have seen, Arendt had claimed that the traditional understanding of human activities had been distorted ever since Plato by the philosophers' preoccupation with the life of the mind. In his allegory of the Cave, Plato had deliberately turned upside down the Greek worldview, maintaining, against Homer's picture of Hades, that it is ordinary life, not life after death, that takes place in a dark underworld, and that it is the life of the body, not of the soul, that is shadowy and unreal.¹⁹⁷ Reinforced by Christianity, Platonism had made contemplation of true reality the most valued activity for two thousand years. It might have been expected, then, that when the new science undermined the status of contemplation by showing that truth can only be found by *doing* things, Plato's original reversal would itself be reversed and the original Greek hierarchy of activities restored. In fact, this did not happen. For reasons that Arendt goes on to explore, the new status given to active life by the scientific revolution led instead to the exaltation of the activity most despised by men of action as well as men of thought in the ancient world: labour.

The route Arendt traces from the scientific revolution to 'the victory of the *animal laborans*'¹⁹⁸ is a tortuous one. The first type of activity to gain in standing from the new science was work, the activity of *homo faber*, whose ingenuity devised the instruments and experiments by which nature could be trapped. The point of all this ingenuity, however, was not to make worldly objects but to repeat and display natural processes, and it was this category of *process* rather than the stable world of *homo faber* that became the key category of modern thought.¹⁹⁹ One example of the way in which the outlook of *homo faber* gradually dissolved into something much more fluid and less worldly is the evolution of utilitarianism. As Arendt had suggested earlier in her analysis of work, utilitarian thinking is the characteristic outlook of the craftsman, who thinks in terms of using means

¹⁹⁵ See chapter 7 below. ¹⁹⁶ HC 288. ¹⁹⁷ HC 292. ¹⁹⁸ HC 320. ¹⁹⁹ HC 307.

to achieve ends and values everything in terms of its usefulness. The utilitarianism of *homo faber* is, however, anchored in a stable world of useful objects. Bentham's 'greatest happiness principle' shows what happens to utilitarian thinking when it is no longer related to a stable human world, but instead to worldless individuals. The end to which all means are related is now maximising the pleasures and minimising the pains of individuals, subjective feelings in which, in effect, it is sheer biological life that has become the highest good. In place of the values of *homo faber*, it is those of the *animal laborans* that have emerged triumphant.

Arendt specifically denies, however,²⁰⁰ that the sheer logic of ideas was responsible for this. Another factor in the equation was the influence of Christianity. As we have seen, she had been interested in early Christianity from the time of her doctoral research on Augustine, and she maintained within *The Human Condition* itself that Jesus had been one of the great discoverers of the human capacity to act and make a new beginning in human relations through forgiveness. All the same, Christianity's rejection of the world seemed to her to make its political significance highly equivocal (as we shall see in more detail later). In particular, the combination of unworldliness with belief in eternal life had, she thought, contributed to what she saw as the ills of modernity. For by the time the scientific revolution took place, the ancient worldview that Plato had turned upside down was no longer available for revival. Plato had turned away from the classical quest for immortality in the public world; but Christianity had completely devalued such immortality by promising eternal life to everyone as individuals. Even when the belief in eternal life was undermined by the general loss of faith following the scientific revolution, the high value for sheer life remained, and a new kind of immortality appeared before men's imaginations, 'the possibly everlasting life process of the species mankind'.²⁰¹ Religious, scientific and philosophical developments all conspired with economic changes, therefore, to bring about the rise of 'society', that life process of socialised mankind that Marx had celebrated.

Surveying the outcome of these developments, Arendt is at her most pessimistic. The activities of her contemporaries seem to her scarcely even to merit the title of 'labour'. 'The last stage of the labouring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species.' With his higher human capacities marginalised, man is 'on the point of developing into that animal species from which, since Darwin, he imagines he has come'.²⁰² Action, it is true, is alive and well in scientific circles, but in the alarming form of acting into

²⁰⁰ HC 313.²⁰¹ HC 321.²⁰² HC 322.

nature and starting off new and uncontrollable processes, and the general outcome of the alienation from the earth on which modern science rests is a combination of hubris and nemesis that is strikingly similar to totalitarianism as Arendt pictures it. Everything is possible, but what men do with their power is turn themselves into a species of animal. No wonder, then, that although she denied any inevitability to totalitarianism,²⁰³ she certainly saw it as an entirely characteristic product of modernity. No wonder, either, that we must see her account of modernity as a shadow cast by her image of totalitarianism.

This story of totalitarianism and modernity is, I believe, the appropriate context within which to read *The Human Condition*. Instead of seeing it as being concerned primarily to recommend an idealised version of Athenian democracy, we should read it as an analysis of a desperate predicament and as a story with a moral. What, then, is the moral of *The Human Condition*? It should be noted that Arendt offers no political programme, and that no direct political implications follow from her analysis. The book has considerably less direct political relevance than *Totalitarianism* or *On Revolution*. Nevertheless, the story does have a moral, which is that human beings would do well to recognise more clearly the conditions of their existence, and to accept and be grateful for the fact that 'men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world'.²⁰⁴ This plurality has two implications for which we should be grateful. For one thing, it makes possible the continual miracle of newness that gives the lie to the modern obsession with automatic processes, a miracle exemplified in the Hungarian uprising which (even while Arendt was writing *The Human Condition*) upset the dead predictability of communist rule. New individuals are continually entering the world, new actions and new thoughts interrupting the routines and processes already established. For another, plurality makes it possible for us to build a world amongst us. In that world, reality can appear to save us from our lonely imaginings. In it, also, we ourselves can appear as unique individuals instead of remaining specimens of an animal species. Doomed to mortality, threatened by natural and pseudo-natural processes, we can nevertheless make a stand against overwhelming odds, and vindicate human dignity by our courage in the face of tragedy. Because we are plural, we need not disappear into the 'holes of oblivion' that threatened to engulf the victims of totalitarianism, but can, if we stand together, remember and pass on the memory of one another's deeds. Because we are plural, we can found lasting institutions to guard us against the processes we ourselves start, and to rescue us from the darkness of each person's lonely heart. The ramifications of Arendt's reflections on this final point will occupy us next.

²⁰³ OT1 vii.

²⁰⁴ HC 7.

5 Morals and politics in a post-totalitarian age

Just as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was to have been followed by a companion work investigating the seeds of Marxist totalitarianism, so *The Human Condition* was to have had a sequel, the *Introduction into Politics*, which was to have been a systematic attempt to deal anew with many of the traditional themes of political thought. Like the Marx book, this remained unwritten but helped to feed the works that Arendt did publish. Of these completed works, many were essays, some of them collected in *Between Past and Future* and *Men in Dark Times*. Some of them were prompted by specific events, like Arendt's book on the trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann, or like the reflections on American politics in the era of the Vietnam War that appeared under the heading *Crises of the Republic*. The most substantial, *On Revolution*, published in 1963, was something of a hybrid. Prompted partly by specific events, it was in no sense limited to these events, but bound together with the thread of revolution many strands of reflection that had their origins in the experience of totalitarianism, and that informed Arendt's uncompleted project for the renewal of political thought.

How best to explicate the dense web of thinking represented by these books and essays presents a problem for the commentator. In particular, should *On Revolution* be given the same sort of detailed exposition accorded in earlier chapters of the present study to *Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*? The intellectual weight of this least-understood and least-valued of Arendt's books would certainly merit such treatment. It must be admitted, however, that one reason why *On Revolution* has been neglected and little understood is that even by Arendt's standards it is unusually allusive and introspective. Much, perhaps most, of the book presupposes knowledge of one or other of her continuing and interlocking trains of thought. Instead of focussing directly, then, on *On Revolution* or on any of Arendt's other books after *The Human Condition*, what I shall aim to do is to clarify those trains of thought themselves, particularly those that have been less noticed in the literature on Arendt. Some of these strands of reflection have already been considered in earlier chapters, notably those

concerned with modernity, the 'social' and the 'liberation of the life process'. Two chapters after this will consider Arendt's long-term attempt to rethink political concepts, and her continuing reflections on the tensions between philosophy and politics that seemed to her to render such rethinking necessary. In the present chapter, however, we shall follow an elusive train of thought that surfaces at many points in Arendt's writings, although it is at its most obtrusive and baffling in *On Revolution*. This train of thought is concerned with politics and morals.

The problem facing Arendt's readers

One of the areas of Arendt's thought that her interpreters have found most difficult to come to terms with concerns the relationship between politics and morals. How could the author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* seek in her later writings 'to purge true politics of love, goodness, conscience, compassion and pity'? How could 'the most searching and original theorist of political horror in the twentieth century . . . as if in self-forgetfulness, accuse compassion and pity as the sponsors of more cruelty than cruelty itself'? George Kateb, whose words these are, is by no means alone in seeing 'unresolved tensions in her thought about politics and morality', nor in responding with 'anxiety' to the 'painful things' that her work contains.¹ Besides the multitude of readers shocked and affronted by her discussion in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* of the 'banality of evil', many more must have been baffled and repelled by some at any rate of the passages to which Kateb refers: by her apparent depreciation of conscience in her essay on 'Civil Disobedience'; by her frequently expressed sympathy with Machiavelli; above all, by the discussion in *On Revolution* of pity and terror during the French Revolution, a discussion that makes one commentator inclined to suspect her 'of having taken leave of her senses'.²

In this chapter I shall argue that Arendt did not take leave of her senses, and that when her reflections on these painful topics are read within their proper context they are not only more intelligible but also more defensible than is usually supposed. Kateb is not alone in assuming that the centre of her thought is the theory of political action put forward in *The Human Condition*, and that it is in the context of her exalted notion of what political action involves that we must understand and criticise her views on

¹ G. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1984) 29, 95, 88.

² S. Dossa, 'Hannah Arendt on Billy Budd and Robespierre: the Public Realm and the Private Self', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 9 (Fall/Winter 1982) 316. Cf. S.J. Whitfield, *Into the Dark: Hannah Arendt and Totalitarianism* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1980) 150, on how 'unintelligible' and 'baffling' her observations in this area seem.

compassion, pity, goodness and conscience.³ Seen in that context, her views do indeed seem puzzling and implausible. But my argument in what follows will be that that is the wrong context, and that the proper starting point when trying to understand and to evaluate her position is not *The Human Condition* but *Totalitarianism*.

The problem facing Arendt

The problem of evil will be the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life in Europe.⁴

When Arendt wrote this in 1945, Nazism represented the essence of the problem, for the Nazis had 'proven beyond doubt what man is capable of'. It was to the questions raised by that experience that Arendt originally addressed the book that became *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: the questions of how Nazism had been possible, how a 'radical evil' could have emerged in Europe in the twentieth century. Now the impact of Nazism was, in all conscience, shattering enough: but we miss the depth of the abyss into which Arendt stared if we fail to realise that this was only half the problem she sought to come to terms with. For Nazism did not have its roots in the mainstream of Western traditions. As we have seen, Arendt specifically denied it any respectable ancestry. This implies that in the early stages of her reflections, the radical evil of Nazism was at any rate set against a belief that saner alternative traditions were ready to hand, notably the revolutionary tradition that had come down from the Jacobins through the European Left. For many in her generation, the ultimate nightmare came after the war when the truth about Stalin's crimes became incontrovertible, and those who had withstood the shock of trying to comprehend totalitarianism of the Right had to try to come to terms with the ultimate betrayal, totalitarianism of the Left. As we know, Arendt altered the design of her book to take account of Stalinism, producing the peculiarly lopsided effect that has attracted so much criticism.

In this chapter, I shall argue not only that Arendt's opaque and troubling remarks about politics and morality arise directly out of her attempt to confront totalitarian evil, but that many of the remarks that give most offence to commentators become more comprehensible once we recognise that the political evil she confronted wore two faces, one right-wing and one left, each of them raising questions of great complexity.

³ Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 28; Cf. B. Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 1981) 1; P. Johnson, *Politics, Innocence and the Limits of Goodness* (London and New York, Routledge, 1988) 153–65.

⁴ 'Nightmare and Flight', *Partisan Review* 12/2 (Spring 1945) 259.

Nazism was above all a phenomenon of social breakdown: the breakdown of political and social structure, of authority and tradition and of the moral barriers against evil-doing. Once these barriers were down, it was easy for the 'gutter' to burst into politics, demonstrating how desperately fragile the dykes of civilisation were. The problem posed by Nazism was therefore to understand how this breakdown could have occurred, and to work out how to build new and stronger barriers against evil. This was a daunting agenda in itself, but the parallels between Nazism and Stalinism immeasurably deepened and complicated the problem. For the specially disturbing feature of Stalinism, as Arendt saw it, was that in this case radical evil could not be diagnosed simply as a case of the gutter welling up when traditional barriers were breached. The peculiar moral problem posed by Stalinism was its connection through Marxism with the heights of political idealism: the idealism that had led a generation of misguided fellow-travellers to condone Stalin's crimes. What the descent of Marxism into totalitarianism demonstrated was that Western political idealism could not be simply reaffirmed against Nazism's 'subterranean stream' of criminality. The problem of political evil was much more complex than that. On this problem Arendt meditated for many years, reflecting upon both its aspects, Nazism and the degeneration of Marxism.

Nazism and the experience of moral collapse

In a series of lectures on moral philosophy delivered at the New School for Social Research in 1965 Arendt revealed some of the 'basic experiences' which lay behind her continuing reflections on morality. Her generation had (she said) been brought up on the still unchallenged assumption 'that moral conduct is a matter of course', something which 'no one in his right mind can any longer claim'. Nurtured on this comfortable assumption, they had been confronted by the shock of Nazism. Even then (since criminals, whether or not they get the opportunity to commit their crimes on a grand scale, are to be found in any society) the 'true moral issue did not arise with the behavior of the Nazis themselves' but was posed by the behaviour of ordinary respectable people.⁵ Although these people would never have dreamed of committing crimes as long as they lived in a society where such activities were not usual, they adapted effortlessly to a system in which blatant crimes against whole categories of people were standard behaviour. In the place of 'thou shalt not kill', which had seemed the most indisputable rule of civilian existence, such people had no difficulty in accepting the Nazis' rule according to which killing was a moral duty for the sake of the

⁵ 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' (1965) MSS Box 40 024585, 024576, 024581. Cf. J. Kohn, 'Thinking/Acting', *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990) 116.

race.⁶ Principles which had been self-evident, moral behaviour which had been 'normal' and 'decent' could not be taken for granted any more.⁷ As Arendt put it in *Totalitarianism*, 'the whole structure of Western culture with all its implied beliefs, traditions, standards of judgement, has come toppling down over our heads.'⁸ Nazism had demonstrated that evil could be more radical and the barriers against evil less secure than anyone in recent times had imagined.

Arendt's observations on the outbreak of 'radical evil' in the concentration camps, and particularly her subsequent qualification, after seeing Eichmann in the dock, that some of its perpetrators had been banal rather than positively wicked, have received a good deal of attention from commentators.⁹ Much less notice has been taken of her reflections in the immediate aftermath of totalitarianism on the fragility of the moral barriers that might have been expected to make mass extermination impossible. Having seen the ease with which ordinary decent Germans accepted the activities of the Nazi regime,¹⁰ and reflecting upon the fact that the word 'morals' was derived from the Latin *mores*, customs, she was struck by the thought that ordinary moral behaviour is indeed simply a matter of custom, and has no more depth or power of resistance than other customs. This alarming insight became linked in her mind with Montesquieu's meditations on the political significance of customs two hundred years before. Her thought processes can be traced most clearly in her 1953 essay on 'Understanding and Politics', which reflects in a wide-ranging manner upon the difficulties of trying to understand totalitarianism, and in

⁶ *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, Faber and Faber, 1963) 134; 'Religion and Politics', *Confluence* 2/3 (September 1953) 125; *The Life of the Mind* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1978) (referred to below as *L of M*) vol. I 177; Arendt in C.J. Friedrich, (ed.), *Totalitarianism* (New York, Grosset and Dunlap, 1964) 78.

⁷ 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024585-6.

⁸ *The Burden of Our Time* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1951) (referred to below as *OT1*) 434. Cf. 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (1st MS, c. 1952/3) MSS Box 69 1-2. At a conference in 1972 Arendt remarked in passing, 'Lenin once said he didn't understand why criminal law should exist, because once we have changed circumstances everybody will prevent everybody else from committing a crime with the same matter of courseness as every man will hurry up to aid a woman who is in distress. I thought this example of Lenin so very nicely nineteenth-century, you know. All this we do not believe any longer.' 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' in M.A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: the Recovery of the Public World* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1979) 323-4.

⁹ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd edition (cited below as *OT3*) (London, Allen and Unwin, 1967) xxxi, 459; *The Human Condition* (cited below as *HC*) (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958) 241; *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 23, 231; E. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982) 367-77; Whitfield, *Into the Dark*, ch. 7; B. Clarke, 'Beyond "The Banality of Evil"', *British Journal of Political Science* 10 (1980) 417-39; S. Dossa, 'Hannah Arendt on Eichmann: the Public, the Private and Evil', *Review of Politics* 46/2 (April 1984) 163-82. Dossa includes references to much of the critical literature on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

¹⁰ 'Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility', *Jewish Frontier* (January 1945) 22.

which she cites Montesquieu's belief that 'the life of peoples . . . is ruled by laws and customs'. Nations begin to collapse when the public realm of the laws is undermined, and when 'the nation . . . loses its capacity for responsible political action'. From then on, in the absence of a public realm of effective law, the only barriers against political evil are patterns of moral behaviour which are actually nothing but customs, and 'every incident can destroy customs and morality which no longer have their foundation in lawfulness, every contingency must threaten a society which is no longer guaranteed by citizens'. Implicitly applying Montesquieu's insights to the triumph of Nazism, Arendt says that he 'outlines the political dangers to a political body which is held together only by customs and traditions, that is by the mere binding force of morality'.¹¹

Looking at this passage from the early 1950s, we can perhaps begin to see one of the reasons why Arendt reflected over so many years on morality in politics. For this same point seemed to be strikingly confirmed by the Eichmann case. The alarming thing about Eichmann was his sheer ordinariness, the fact that monstrous deeds had been committed by someone who was so far from demonic.¹² The greatest challenge of the case, in Arendt's view, was therefore posed by the fact that 'an average, "normal" person, neither feeble-minded nor indoctrinated nor cynical, could be perfectly incapable of telling right from wrong'.¹³ It was not that Eichmann lacked a sense of moral obligation – he was quite concerned to do the right thing – just that, in the circles in which he moved, he met no one who seemed to think that the Final Solution was wrong, and plenty of people for whom killing Jews had become a duty; unpleasant, like so many duties, but something that had to be done.¹⁴ Morality, the *mores* or custom of the country, was still there but had changed its content. What this meant to Arendt was that the experience of Nazism, which raised the inevitable question, 'What barriers should have been able to prevent this monstrous evil?', at the same time gave back the frightening answer, 'Not ordinary morality, for ordinary decent moral people adapted to Nazism with ease as soon as it became the established order.'

Everyday secular morality was clearly a shaky barrier against political evil: but what of religion? There were plenty of religious spokesmen ready to point out in the aftermath of the concentration camps that these things could not have been done if Western men had not turned away from faith in God. Arendt devoted a good deal of thought to this, and up to a point she was ready to agree that loss of faith and the general collapse of religious

¹¹ 'Understanding and Politics', *Partisan Review* 20/4 (July–August 1953) 384–5.

¹² *L of M I 4*.

¹³ *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 23.

¹⁴ *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 134, 93.

authority had indeed been enabling factors leading to the death camps.¹⁵ But to suppose that religion could be deliberately revived as a political safeguard seemed to her to show a complete misunderstanding of religion.¹⁶ She often remarked that loss of fear of Hell and belief in the Last Judgement had great political significance: 'from a viewpoint of mere usefulness, nothing could compete better with the inner coercion of totalitarian ideologies in power over man's soul than fear of Hell'.¹⁷ But it seemed to her that this observation led back to, not away from, the conclusion that political evils needed a political solution. For she claimed that the fear of hell was itself a political phenomenon, 'the only political element in traditional religion', arguing that it had been invented by Plato expressly as a political device for controlling the masses, and had been adopted into Christianity only when, on the fall of Rome, the church assumed responsibility for secular affairs. Whatever the doctrine's political usefulness in the past, it seemed clear to her that any attempt to revive it was doomed to failure.¹⁸

From the point of view of anyone looking for safeguards against the sort of things that had happened in Nazi Germany, then, religion did not provide the answer. No doubt there would always be individual believers who would become martyrs rather than support such a regime,¹⁹ but not enough to provide general institutional safeguards, while the one aspect of traditional religion that really might have been effective against Nazism and Stalinism, the old-fashioned fear of Hell, had lost its effectiveness in the modern world.

If commonsense morality had turned out to be a very weak barrier against totalitarianism, and if religion was no help, where else was it possible to turn? Perhaps to philosophy, which had so often claimed the authority to deliver moral absolutes? The difficulty here, it seemed to Arendt, was that such absolutes were simply not forthcoming.²⁰ Surveying the Western tradition of moral philosophy, she found it unhelpful partly because moral philosophers had been so reluctant to recognise the

¹⁵ 'A Reply' to E. Voegelin's review of *OTI*, *Review of Politics* 15 (January 1953) 82; 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 313–14. Arendt also pointed out the weakness of the churches' responses to totalitarianism: 'Religion and the Intellectuals', *Partisan Review* 17 (February 1950) 115: "'The Deputy': Guilt by Silence?', *New York Herald Tribune Magazine* (23 February 1964) 6–9.

¹⁶ 'Religion and the Intellectuals' 115. For an interesting comment on Arendt's own religious position, see Kohn, 'Thinking/Acting' 133, n.64.

¹⁷ 'Religion and Politics' 125; Cf. 'Religion and the Intellectuals' 115; 'What is Authority?' *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Viking Press, 1968) 133; *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973) 191 (this edition is referred to below as *OR*).

¹⁸ 'What is Authority?' 128–35.

¹⁹ "'The Deputy'" 6.

²⁰ 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 313–14.

possibility of deliberate wickedness²¹ but also because their attempt to lay down absolute moral principles had been misconceived from the beginning. She argued that it had in fact been political rather than philosophical considerations that had led Plato to attempt this, just as political considerations had led him to invent his myth of future rewards and punishments.²² The death of Socrates at the hands of the Athenian democrats set Plato off on this course of trying to rule the world through philosophy: but Socrates himself (whom Arendt saw as the more authentic philosopher) had handed down no rules and delivered no absolutes. As we shall see later, Arendt believed that the 'internal dialogue' of thought as practised by Socrates had great moral significance for the individual, particularly in times of political crisis, and she was very much struck by the *inability* to think that seemed to have made possible Eichmann's role in the Final Solution.²³ To hope to guard against totalitarianism by trying to establish a nation of thinkers, however, would be no more realistic than to look for salvation to a nation of saints. Neither religion nor philosophy could be expected to deliver the kind of institutional moral absolute that could prevent a recurrence of totalitarianism.

Earlier generations, particularly the men of the eighteenth century with whom Arendt felt so much sympathy, would of course have looked to nature to provide absolute standards for politics by dictating natural laws and granting inalienable rights. But nature had turned out to be as unreliable an ally as other supposed authorities. Was totalitarianism contrary to natural law? In the essay on 'Ideology and Terror' which she added to the later editions of *Totalitarianism*, Arendt stressed the Nazi claim that they were *carrying out* the law of nature – the survival of the fittest in the struggle of the races – just as communist totalitarians claimed that they were carrying out the laws of history discovered by Marx. In the name of these 'laws of movement' they raged across the world, breaking down all the barriers of those man-made laws which we need in order to stabilise the constantly changing world of men.²⁴ And as for 'natural rights', their flimsiness as a bulwark against political evil had become obvious well before the advent of totalitarianism, as Arendt had made abundantly clear. 'Natural rights' exist only within a political structure, and only where human beings have been prepared to build such a structure and to take responsibility for guaranteeing one another such rights.²⁵

It seems, therefore, that if we try to appeal to natural rights as a bulwark against totalitarianism, we are once again driven back to politics. And this is indeed the conclusion to which Arendt's reflections upon Nazism led her:

²¹ 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024564; *L of M* II 34, 118.

²² 'What is Authority?' 104–15. ²³ *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 44.

²⁴ *OT* 3 465. ²⁵ *OT* 1 439.

only political action and political structures could provide a defence against the evil that had appeared in politics in the twentieth century, and which conventional morality, religion, philosophy and appeals to nature had been powerless to avert. The only sure guard against totalitarianism was the integration of the bewildered modern masses into constituted republics founded upon equal rights and respect for the law, and peopled by public-spirited citizens rather than functionaries. If the people of Europe in the 1930s had been citizens rather than bourgeois or masses; if they had understood 'the stern Jacobin concept of the nation based upon human rights – that republican view of communal life which asserts that (in the words of Clemenceau) by infringing on the rights of one you infringe on the rights of all';²⁶ if Germans in particular had understood their duty to the public world as well as their duty to their families;²⁷ if the Jews had realised that they could be political actors instead of helpless victims of history;²⁸ if all these conditions had been granted, the tragedy of Nazism could never have come about. The first edition of *Totalitarianism* ends with an appeal for 'a consciously planned beginning of history . . . a consciously devised new polity'²⁹ to assure to all men those rights which are not given by God or by nature, which have no transcendent guarantee behind them but which can be established only by men who acknowledge that they share the earth with one another. Experience of Nazism, and of the weakness of alternative barriers against political evil, led her to the conclusion that our best safeguard is the deliberate building of republics to guarantee equal rights, and the defence of those republics by citizens who understand what they are defending.

Arendt emerged from her encounter with Nazism, then, as a radical republican in the tradition of Clemenceau, the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, convinced that republican institutions and public-spirited citizens provided the strongest possible defences against totalitarianism. Why, then, did she not proceed forthwith to write a manifesto of radical republicanism, an exposition of positive principles to match her exploration in *Totalitarianism* of negative experiences? Well, in a sense she did so, for (as we shall see) *On Revolution* is to a large extent concerned with the foundation of republics and the perpetuation of a spirit of citizenship. Only 'in a sense', though, for the relatively straightforward political message with which she responded to Nazism became enormously complicated as she wrestled with the implications not of Nazi but of Stalinist totalitarianism. For the trouble was that whereas Arendt could reassert against Nazism the

²⁶ OTI 106. ²⁷ 'Organized Guilt' 22.

²⁸ 'The Jewish State: Fifty Years After' (1946) in *The Jew As Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. R.H. Feldman (New York, Grove Press, 1978) 174.

²⁹ OTI 439. Cf. 'Franz Kafka: A Revaluation' *Partisan Review* 11/4 (Fall 1944) 421.

republican and humanist heritage of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the Soviet version of totalitarianism seemed to have emerged (admittedly after some strange twists and turns) from that very tradition. In the case of Stalinism, unlike Nazism, it seemed that radical evil had emerged not from gutter politics but from high-minded commitment to something alarmingly akin to the revolutionary humanism Arendt herself wanted to defend.

Stalinism and the corruption of the revolutionary tradition

We have seen that immediately after the completion of *Totalitarianism* Arendt turned to what was to have been her companion volume on 'Totalitarian Elements in Marxism' and addressed the painful question, how it was that the revolutionary tradition that so many had expected to save Europe from Nazism had itself gone wrong and merged into totalitarianism. Her answer to this question was exceedingly complex. Although she did not believe that Stalinism had any simple or direct connection with the tradition of revolutionary humanism, there was more than the mere label of Marxism to confuse well-intentioned fellow-travellers and to lead them into making excuses for unspeakable crimes. Two opposite but complementary features of Marxism, entangled together within Marx's conception of man as a 'working animal', had helped to torpedo the Revolution and to make Stalinism possible; and if one of these was Marx's determinism, the other, more disturbing from Arendt's point of view, was the humanist strand running counter to determinism in his thought. For, as we have seen, she found in Marx's concept of man as a 'working animal' two opposed attitudes to politics, both of them involving misconceptions of the nature of political action. One of them was historical determinism, which paralleled Nazi biological determinism. What concerns us here, however, is the other, the humanistic, anti-determinist side which Marx shared with the tradition of revolutionary humanism that had aimed ever since the French Revolution to build a better world: the very tradition to which Arendt herself wanted to appeal in response to Nazism.

Reflecting upon the way in which the high ideals of Marxism had transmuted themselves into Stalinism, Arendt came to the conclusion that 'Marxism could be developed into a totalitarian ideology because of its perversion, or misunderstanding of political action as the making of history.'³⁰ And why should it be so dangerous to think of political action as 'making history'? Partly, of course, on account of the Marxist belief that history has a preordained plot with a happy ending, but above all because

³⁰ 'The Ex-Communists', *Commonweal* 57/24 (20 March 1953) 597.

the notion of *making* history, taking one's future in one's hands and shaping it, always entails violence. Fabrication is a violent business. But once Arendt identified this stress on 'making history' as a crucial factor in rendering Stalinism possible, she also realised how far-reaching the problems of guarding against a recurrence of totalitarianism actually were. For unlike the historical determinism which Marxism shared with Nazism and with much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought, the understanding of political action as 'making' something, with all its connotations of accompanying violence, was not specifically modern, but was deeply rooted in Western traditions of political thought from Plato onwards. Furthermore, it was a particularly powerful theme in that very same republican tradition to which Arendt wanted to appeal *against* totalitarianism: the humanist tradition according to which man can create in the wilderness of this world a 'human artifice' to house and protect him.³¹ Arendt therefore came to the conclusion that in order both to identify the totalitarian elements in Marxism and to understand how to guard against totalitarianism it was necessary to make clear what political action really is: to disentangle it from 'labour' with its connotations of necessity and inexorability on the one hand, and from 'work' with its connotations of violent 'making' on the other. Hence the analysis that culminated in *The Human Condition*.

The connection between abstract questions about the nature of human activities and the concrete problems of understanding and opposing totalitarianism can be seen very clearly in an unpublished essay from 1950, at the time when Arendt was just embarking upon the enquiry that would take her to *The Human Condition* and beyond. This essay, entitled 'The Eggs Speak Up', is particularly relevant to our present enquiry into her views on politics and morals because its title refers to the proverbial justification of revolutionary violence, that one cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs. Not that this maxim on its own is appropriate to Stalinism: in order to turn this traditional revolutionary belief into a justification for totalitarianism, Stalin had to turn it round so that the emphasis was on the breaking rather than on its result: in effect, 'You can't break eggs without making an omelette.'³² But one reason why so many well-intentioned people went along with this for so long was, according to Arendt, that the attitude summed up in the 'omelette' proverb is very deeply rooted in Western thinking, drawing on analogies with fabrication. One cannot make a table without killing a tree, and as soon as the model of fabrication is applied to politics it sanctions violence. 'Totalitarianism, here as in most other respects, only drew the final, the most unrestrained

³¹ OT1 296.

³² 'The Eggs Speak Up' (c. 1950) MSS Box 57 020906.

consequences from certain heritages which have become predicaments.' Arendt adds that even where totalitarianism has been avoided, man who has ceased to think of himself as *creatura Dei* tends to think of himself as *homo faber*, with an instrumental and potentially violent attitude to the world. She does not at this point rehearse her reasons for assuming that religious belief cannot be restored, but she reaffirms her commitment to a political answer to totalitarianism by quoting a maxim for political action that is diametrically opposite to the 'omelette' proverb. This is the principle of republican citizenship pronounced by Clemenceau during his fight for justice for Dreyfus: 'L'Affaire d'un seul est l'affaire de tous.'³³

In this early essay Arendt connects Marxist totalitarianism with the misunderstanding of political action as 'making' which she finds in Marx, in the revolutionary tradition and in Western political thought more generally, and condemns the instrumental attitude to political violence which it sanctions. In other words Marxism had turned out to be dangerous not only because of its belief in historical necessity, but also because in Marxism 'all the implications inherent in looking on action in the light of fabrication have been fully developed'.³⁴

The upshot was that in looking for barriers against totalitarianism Arendt was faced with a dilemma. When confronting Nazism, which was made possible, as we saw earlier, by a collapse of traditional standards and a surrender of human values to supposed 'laws of nature', she felt able to appeal to the tradition of the French Revolution and to reassert the Enlightenment's ideal of building a republic of equal citizens. But once she began to think seriously about the Marxist version of totalitarianism she realised that among its preconditions had in fact been that same revolutionary tradition with its understanding of man as the maker. A way of thinking that seemed at first sight to be the very heart of the humanist claim for human freedom and dignity, the idea of creating new political forms, had helped to make Stalinism possible.

As a result, one of the aims of her political thought, which appears both in the distinction between 'action' and 'work' in *The Human Condition* and in the complex contrast between the American and the French Revolutions in *On Revolution*, was to disentangle this treacherous strand from the revolutionary tradition, and to present a version of humanist republicanism *without* the model of fabrication, without means-ends thinking, without the sanctification of violence – and therefore without 'Machiavelianism' as usually understood. As we shall see later, she had her own interpretation of Machiavelli (as of so many other thinkers) and was an

³³ 'The Eggs Speak Up' 020914.

³⁴ 'Philosophy and Politics: the Problem of Action and Thought After the French Revolution' (1954) MSS Box 69 023389.

admirer of him on her own terms. But ‘Machiavellianism’ as usually understood – the justification of violence and deceit in politics on the grounds that the end justifies the means – was anathema to her. Let us now examine her views on the subject.

Arendt as anti-Machiavel

In her opposition to the idea that the end justifies the means in politics, and particularly to the notion that violence is justified by a good cause, Arendt is emphatic. Besides her elaborate distinction in *The Human Condition* between work and action and her observations there on the dangers of understanding action in terms of fabrication and so bringing instrumental thinking into politics,³⁵ she issued more specific warnings in her later essay ‘On Violence’ against the justification and even glorification of violence within the revolutionary tradition. Among the constant themes of her mature political thought are strenuous efforts to distinguish *power* from violence, and stress on the special dangers, in view of the unpredictability of human affairs, of trying to use violence as a means to political ends. The ends are always in danger of being overwhelmed by the means used to achieve them: ‘the practice of violence . . . changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.’³⁶ Elsewhere she recalled the proverb that the only way to fight a dragon is to become a dragon oneself, and doubted whether the price was worth paying.³⁷ These theoretical statements echoed the stand she had taken earlier on the very practical questions of Jewish terrorism in Palestine and the treatment of Arabs by Jews. During the conflicts surrounding the founding of the state of Israel she had been prepared to defend ‘uncompromising morality’ and to cite in her support the old Jewish legend of ‘the thirty-six unknown righteous men who always exist and without whom the world would go to pieces’.³⁸

Over and over again Arendt warned against the view commonly regarded as ‘Machiavellian’, that a good cause justifies the use of evil means. As she never tired of pointing out, the fatal flaw in this maxim is that it takes for granted a wholly unrealistic degree of control over future events. Looking back with the hindsight of the political observer, we may indeed judge an act in terms of its effects, but this is not a judgement we can anticipate. Given the inherent uncertainty of human affairs, the good that is supposed

³⁵ HC 228–9.

³⁶ ‘On Violence’ in *Crises of the Republic* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972) 177.

³⁷ ‘The Ex-Communists’ 596; Cf. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 374.

³⁸ ‘Peace or Armistice in the Near East?’ (1950) *The Jew as Pariah* 217; ‘Magnes, the Conscience of the Jewish People’, *Jewish Newsletter* 8/25 (24 November 1952) 3.

to come about in the end cannot be other than highly speculative: the only thing we can be sure about is the evil means.³⁹

This same concern to free the revolutionary tradition from its connotations of violence and 'Machiavellianism' is one of the principal themes of *On Revolution*. One of the purposes of Arendt's contrast between the American and the French Revolutions was to suggest, in defiance of traditional thinking, that revolution, the foundation of a republic, may not necessarily have to be a bloody affair. Revolution does indeed mean a new beginning, and, as she observes, ever since the murder of Remus by Romulus such political beginnings have been associated in all political traditions with violence. According to the legends that enshrine fundamental human assumptions, 'whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organisation men may have achieved has its origin in crime'.⁴⁰ But although she begins the book by stating these assumptions (and although she must have reflected that they might appear to be confirmed by the violence attending the recent foundation of the state of Israel) the contrast she draws between the two revolutions, American and French, is designed to challenge this conventional wisdom and to show that it is false. The American case shows that successful revolution, that is, successful foundation of a republic, may be brought about not by the creative violence of a revolutionary dictatorship but by agreements between free men.⁴¹ The terror into which the French and subsequent revolutions degenerated should not be seen as the necessary price of political freedom. One of its causes, namely the revolutionaries' misguided approach to political morality, will concern us shortly.

We have seen that Arendt was not in the conventional sense a 'Machiavellian'. Establishing this, however, only brings us more sharply up against the genuine problems of understanding her views on politics and morality. For the fact is that she does cite Machiavelli frequently and in respectful terms. She claims, it is true, that he is commonly misunderstood:⁴² but why did she cite him at all? Above all, why did she muddy the waters by appearing to criticise compassion, pity, goodness and conscience? Exasperation on the part of her readers is understandable, for there is no doubt that the vocabulary she uses lends itself to misinterpretation. Nevertheless, I think that if we follow her trains of thought we can see that

³⁹ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023374; 'The Eggs Speak Up' 020911; 'The Ex-Communists' 597; 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024616; 'Hermann Broch: 1886–1951', *Men in Dark Times* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970) 148. For a quite different interpretation, see Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 31.

⁴⁰ *OR* 20; Cf. 'What is Authority?' 139.

⁴¹ *OR* 213; Cf. 'What is Authority?' 140.

⁴² 'What is Authority?' 137; 'Lectures on the History of Political Theory' (1955) MSS Boxes 40–1 024025.

her animadversions on compassion and the rest are not some kind of light-minded aberration, especially inexcusable in one who had looked over the edge into the abyss; on the contrary, they are integral parts of her continuing preoccupation with totalitarianism and with the problem of how to prevent its recurrence. We might have expected that her response would be to call for higher moral standards in politics,⁴³ whereas, to quote Jerome Kohn, 'if one looks in Arendt's work for moral or ethical theorems, they are simply not to be found'.⁴⁴ But the passages that shock her critics so much need to be read as part of her long meditation upon precisely this expected response to totalitarianism.

In a sense, as we shall see, the assertion of more exacting principles in politics was precisely what she was aiming at, but as she reflected on the problem she could see a number of complications along the way. For one thing, it seemed to her that what were often seen as 'high moral standards' were part of the problem, in that one of the reasons why the revolutionary tradition had gone so horribly wrong was that its supporters had tried to introduce inappropriate motives and standards into politics. Secondly, for all her condemnation of what is conventionally understood as 'Machiavellianism', she believed that Machiavelli had been quite right to recognise that there really are inescapable difficulties in the relations between public and private moral standards. Let us now examine these complexities.

The tragedy of revolution

Looking at totalitarianism of the Left, Arendt came to the disturbing conclusion that if one of the errors that had made it possible had been the 'vulgar Machiavellianism' of breaking eggs in the hope of a utopian omelette, another was, sadly, the attempt to base revolutionary politics upon the intense compassion with suffering humanity that had driven so many of its leaders and sympathisers into action. Not that Arendt was attributing Stalin's crimes to high-mindedness or tenderness of heart: but she did believe that compassion had been the motive that had 'haunted and driven the best men of all revolutions',⁴⁵ such as Robespierre, Lenin and Trotsky, and that it had been compassion that misled the likes of Brecht into accepting 'Machiavellian' strategies for revolution and even into defending the crimes of Stalin. It seemed to her that the dangers of trying to conduct politics on the basis of compassion could be seen in the French Revolution, and that the relative hardness of heart of the American

⁴³ Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 85; Cf. 'The Eggs Speak Up' 020910.

⁴⁴ Kohn, 'Thinking/Acting' 105.

⁴⁵ *OR* 71 – including, presumably, Arendt's husband.

Founding Fathers, however chilling to us now,⁴⁶ had in political terms been no bad thing. But how could the compassion that Robespierre learned from Rousseau's writings contribute to the Terror? What is the connection?

In order to understand Arendt's argument, it is essential to recognise that she does not intend any denigration of authentic compassion, by which she means 'to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious'.⁴⁷ In the discussions of Melville's *Billy Budd* and Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor* which form part of her treatment of the subject in *On Revolution*, she attributes compassion to Jesus and to Billy Budd, and clearly finds it an entirely admirable quality in personal relations. Her argument is not concerned to deny the goodness of compassion, but only to consider what happens when it moves out of the sphere of direct, face-to-face personal relationships and becomes entangled with politics. For her claim is that compassion, like love and (as we shall see) like pure goodness, is an essentially unpolitical phenomenon. Compassion is a passionate sympathy with a particular suffering person and does not lend itself to generalisation. Furthermore, it prompts the person who feels it to direct action rather than to speech and discussion. 'Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence.'⁴⁸

If compassion is essentially unpolitical; if, moreover (as we must suppose) it has always existed, how could it suddenly have begun to distort politics at the time of the French Revolution? Arendt's answer is that compassion entered revolutionary politics in an altered and perverted form after Rousseau discovered that it was possible to enjoy and cultivate the feeling of suffering with others, to generalise it and, above all, to talk about it. What Rousseau did, according to Arendt, was to transform the 'passion' of compassion into an 'emotion or sentiment' which she calls 'pity'. Unlike compassion, which is a matter of direct fellow-feeling with a specific sufferer, pity is boundless. It can take in the entire imagined multitude of the unfortunate and feed upon it, batten upon suffering and turning it into a disguise for power-seeking and an excuse for cruelty. Reflecting on Robespierre's combination of 'Pity and Terror', Arendt quotes from a petition to the National Convention: 'Par pitié, par amour pour l'humanité, soyez inhumains.' Her point is not that Robespierre and the Jacobins were hypocrites revelling in shallow pity while pretending genuine compassion, but simply that displaying personal feelings on the public stage is bound to distort them. However authentic Robespierre's feelings may have been to begin with, 'his compassion would have become pity when he brought it out

⁴⁶ Chilling to Arendt as well as to the rest of us: *OR* 84, 95.

⁴⁷ *OR* 85. ⁴⁸ *OR* 86.

into the open where he could no longer direct it toward specific suffering and focus it on particular persons'.⁴⁹

Those who, like Robespierre, were inspired by this kind of generalised pity, seemed to become immunised against compassion for the victims of their policies. And one reason why there were so many victims was that revolutionaries who prided themselves on their feelings and motives, that is, on matters which belong in the 'darkness' of 'the human heart', easily became suspicious of the motives of others, competing in public declarations of their own feelings but seeing hypocrisy in everyone else. Unfortunately, Arendt concludes, authentic human feelings cannot stand the glare of publicity without being perverted, so that 'every effort to make goodness manifest in public ends with the appearance of crime and criminality on the political scene'.⁵⁰

As so often when reading Arendt, it is easy to underestimate the complexity of her thinking here. She is not saying that authentic compassion for suffering is anything other than admirable. Furthermore, what she says about the dangers of pity does not imply that principles are out of place in politics. On the contrary, her point is that the trouble with pity is that it is *not* a principle but an emotion, a 'sentiment' which preys upon the unfortunate. Its alternative, the authentic principle of republicanism, is not by any means callousness, but what Arendt calls 'solidarity' with others. This is the public, political equivalent of private, personal compassion. 'Solidarity' establishes 'deliberately and, as it were, dispassionately a community of interest with the oppressed and the exploited',⁵¹ seeing them not as objects of emotion but as equal partakers in human dignity. It is relevant here that Arendt knew from direct experience what it was to be one of 'the unfortunate', a member of a persecuted and suffering minority, grateful for authentic *compassion* but infuriated by the patronage of *pity*, and craving the respect *solidarity* implies. During the war, when she was a Jewish refugee, she campaigned for the establishment of a Jewish army so that Jews could be combatants on equal terms instead of being mere victims, and called for justice rather than sympathy.⁵²

Arendt acknowledges that by comparison with the sentiment of pity, the principle of solidarity 'may appear cold and abstract', concerned with general ideas like human dignity rather than with feeling.⁵³ But this is actually an advantage, for those inspired by solidarity are not carried away from reality on the boundless seas of emotion. Nor is its application limited to the unfortunate: solidarity is a principle that can apply to all human

⁴⁹ OR 89. ⁵⁰ OR 98.

⁵¹ OR 88.

⁵² 'Die Juedische Armee- ein Mittel zur Versoehnung der Voelker' MSS Box 64 3.

⁵³ OR 89.

beings.⁵⁴ To reiterate her point, this does not imply hardness of heart. Compassion is to her the proper response of decent people confronted by suffering and the passion that drives most radicals. Her point is simply that politics involves generalisation, and that to try to base it on generalised *feeling* is very dangerous.⁵⁵ Generalised humanity means the *principle* of solidarity with all men. It was this principle that she had recognised and celebrated in Clemenceau's response to the Dreyfus Affair. In other words, her critique of 'pity' is not an attempt to dismiss high idealistic principles from politics.

The misunderstanding here stems from Arendt's habit of using words in special senses without alerting her readers to what she is doing. Like so many of the terms she uses, 'principle' has special connotations for her, and if we explore these we will be better able to see what she is getting at. Her use of the term 'principle' is particularly indebted to Montesquieu, although she adapted and extended his usage for her own purposes. In the early 1950s, when she was thinking about the 'totalitarian elements of Marxism', she meditated at length on *l'Esprit des lois*, and ideas derived from Montesquieu are particularly important elements in her thinking about politics and morals. We have already seen how she appropriated his warning of the dangers of societies in which the only protection against tyranny is custom, *mores*, rather than a solid structure of law. Later we shall also see how important to her was Montesquieu's understanding of laws as 'rapports', relations, rather than as commands handed down by authority. What concerns us here, however, is that she was also much struck by the distinction he made in his classification of governments between the 'nature' of a government and its 'principle': 'virtue' is the principle of a republic, 'honour of a monarchy, 'fear' of despotism. A political system, in other words, possesses not only a *structure* but a 'moving or guiding principle (that which sets it into motion by making it act)'.⁵⁶

'Principles' in *l'Esprit des lois* inform particular types of government by inspiring the actions of the men who participate in them: in other words, they are dynamic, and Arendt took up and extended Montesquieu's term in order to articulate her increasing sense of the dynamism of political action. For at the centre of her political thought lies the claim that human beings are free. They are not automatons; they are not restricted to mere predictable behaviour, nor can their activities be encompassed by the notion of pursuing means toward a goal. Human beings have the capacity

⁵⁴ Cf. 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts About Lessing', *Men in Dark Times* 12–16, 24–5.

⁵⁵ Cf. 'Political Experiences' (1955) MSS Box 40 024160.

⁵⁶ 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (1st MS, 1952–3) MSS Box 69 20. This piece is closely related both to 'Understanding and Politics' and to 'Ideology and Terror', in which Arendt meditates within a framework inspired by Montesquieu on the 'nature' and 'principle' of totalitarianism.

to *act* in the sense of beginning something new and unpredictable, and such action cannot be understood as the practical application of a theoretical rule.⁵⁷ Instead it is inspired and informed by a 'principle'.

Arendt does not mean by this a stateable theoretical maxim such as 'promises ought to be kept', for 'principles' in her sense are not intellectual constructions at all. 'The manifestation of principles comes about only through action, they are manifest in the world as long as the action lasts, but no longer.'⁵⁸ Principles are not abstract but they are extremely general, inspiring actions without prescribing them. They relate to the manner in which people act, and particularly to the way they *begin* to act, the *principium* that establishes the principle of later action. Thus the manner in which the American Revolutionaries embarked upon their enterprise, not in violence but inspired by 'the interconnected principle of mutual promise and common deliberation',⁵⁹ was crucial in laying the foundations of a stable republic. Arendt refers at different times to a wide range of principles that inspire political action, not all of them admirable. 'Solidarity' we have already encountered; the principles of 'public or political freedom, and public or political happiness'⁶⁰ appeared during the revolutions of the eighteenth century; other principles include 'loyalty, honor, virtue, faith',⁶¹ but also 'fear or distrust or hatred'.⁶² Acting according to a principle is not the same as conforming to a law. Laws are fences marking the limits of action, whereas principles are dynamic, inspiring action.⁶³

Arendt adopted and extended Montesquieu's term partly because it enabled her to articulate her sense of the way in which human freedom transcends the mere application in practice of maxims established in theory. But I think that another reason must have had to do with the depth of her moral scepticism. Readers often have difficulty in understanding her because, influenced by religious and philosophical traditions, they take for granted that the universe as we experience it is morally coherent. Whether consciously or not, they tend to assume that all moral phenomena must be manifestations of the same underlying reality, and that all authentic moral experiences must therefore be compatible. But Arendt's starting point is a cosmos that has fallen apart into distinct and incoherent fragments.⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Hill, *Hannah Arendt* 305.

⁵⁸ 'What is Freedom?', *Between Past and Future* 152.

⁵⁹ OR 214. ⁶⁰ OR 123. ⁶¹ 'Nature of Totalitarianism' (1st MS) 23.

⁶² 'What is Freedom?' 152. ⁶³ 'Nature of Totalitarianism' (1st MS) 23-4.

⁶⁴ This is, I think, the fundamental flaw in the careful attempt by Seyla Benhabib to provide Arendt with a consistent moral and political theory. Benhabib's assumption that moral principles *must* be universally valid and mutually consistent prevents her from understanding Arendt's position. See S. Benhabib, 'Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought', *Political Theory* 16/1 (February 1988) 29-51. For a view of moral experience that is in some respects much closer to Arendt's, see Martha Nussbaum's profound study, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Whatever her personal religious beliefs, she was convinced that religious authority no longer existed and that philosophy could not fill its place. In this situation, the danger of moral nihilism was immense, but it did not seem to her to be inescapable. As we shall see, the study of 'authority' to which she was led in the 1950s by her investigations of Marx's intellectual ancestry convinced her that authority as a concept and an institution had had a beginning (in Roman political experience) as well as an end in the twentieth century. This meant that although it might be very difficult to manage without authoritative traditions and rules, human beings had done this before. 'There was a time when authority in our occidental sense did not exist. We can live without authority.'⁶⁵

Instead of reacting to the crisis of post-Nietzschean and post-Nazi modernity with the despairing conclusion that 'God is dead' and therefore 'everything is permitted', Arendt took comfort from the fact that since action and judgement had been possible *before* the establishment of the great Western trinity of religion, tradition and authority, these same human capacities must still be available after its collapse. Her stance is one of cautious humanism: although there are no absolute standards to be found outside the human world, this need not leave us helpless, since standards and judgements are themselves human. The reason why we need standards and judgements at all is that we are free, but in this freedom itself may be found the source of the standards and judgements that we need.⁶⁶

If no rules are handed down from on high to prescribe what we should do or refrain from doing, what moral resources *do* we have? Quite a lot, according to Arendt, although none of them is absolutely reliable, and incompatibilities between them are always possible. We may not be able to establish moral rules by logical reasoning, but we can develop a faculty of judgement.⁶⁷ Action may be a much less regular and predictable activity than the mere application of preexisting maxims, but free action is informed by principles.⁶⁸ To the objection that in the absence of absolute, superhuman standards there is no guarantee that we will get things right, Arendt assented: there *is* no such guarantee.⁶⁹ There are no 'bannisters' for us to hold on to. We simply are in the position of acting and judging without rules given to us from outside.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ 'Breakdown of Authority' (1953) MSS Box 68 3.

⁶⁶ 'Understanding and Politics' 391.

⁶⁷ *L of M I* 192; 'Remarks' at a meeting of the American Society of Christian Ethics (1973) MSS Box 70 011835-6.

⁶⁸ This is why Arendt draws an analogy with the performing arts and stresses virtuosity: e.g. 'What is Freedom?' 153.

⁶⁹ 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 313-14.

⁷⁰ For an interesting recent discussion of Arendt's interest in political foundation in contrast to philosophical foundationalism, see B. Honig, 'Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic', *American Political Science Review*

We do of course need formal rules in the shape of laws to regulate our public activities, but these are human rules, established by agreement to determine the boundaries of action: their function is to limit action rather than to inspire it. What inspires action is a principle, and principles and laws sometimes clash. Discussing this in her unpublished essay 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism', Arendt began by aligning the possible clash between law and principle with the distinction between public and personal life, 'ranging all the way from the man who breaks all traffic laws because his wife is dying to the central theme of the *Antigone*'.⁷¹ But any hope that her position might be able to be summed up in a tidy set of symmetrical distinctions, law/principle, public/private, politics/morals, would be misplaced. Private, personal action is not the only kind of moral activity informed by principles: there is also political action, which is distinguished from private action not by lack of principles, not necessarily even by being inspired by different principles (since loyalty, for example, could inspire both), but simply by the *direction* of moral commitment; by being directed to the public world, like Rosa Luxemburg's⁷² or Lincoln's,⁷³ rather than to personal relations like *Antigone*'s.

Given that there is no built-in cosmic morality to guarantee moral coherence, clashes between authentic moral experiences are inevitable and can arise in many different circumstances. The particular problem in regard to politics, and the reason why Machiavelli was in some respects quite right, is that the most impressive moral examples available within human experience actually lead us away from that concern for the public world that is the very stuff of politics, and that seemed particularly urgent in the post-totalitarian era.

In *On Revolution* Arendt touched on these problems in connection with her discussion of compassion and of the impossibility of conducting public life on the basis of experiences that can be authentic only in personal relations, but she said herself that the French Revolutionaries had not plumbed the depths of the problem of good and evil in politics, since their concept of 'goodness' did not go beyond compassion, nor their understanding of evil beyond selfishness. She therefore turned to two works of literature, *Billy Budd* and *The Brothers Karamazov* for insights that illuminated the French Revolution but went beyond it to show that the revolutionaries had embarked upon a 'tragic and self-defeating enter-

85/1 (March 1991) 97–113. Benjamin Barber defends a position very similar to Arendt's, apparently without being aware of their common ground: e.g. 'Politics is what men do when metaphysics fails' (B. Barber, *Strong Democracy – Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984) 131).

⁷¹ 'Nature of Totalitarianism' (1st MS) 23.

⁷² 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 311.

⁷³ 'Civil Disobedience' in *Crises of the Republic* 61.

prise'.⁷⁴ What Melville and Dostoevsky between them show, according to Arendt, is that even the most genuine, the most authentic goodness would leave the problems of politics unsolved. Dostoevsky's Jesus can expose the eloquent pity of the Grand Inquisitor, but can answer him only with silence and a kiss. The stammering innocence of Billy Budd can answer evil with a blow, but cannot establish 'lasting institutions',⁷⁵ and must surrender to the 'virtue' of Captain Vere the task of carrying on the business of the world. To this extent Arendt did indeed believe that Machiavelli had seen a profound truth. The answer to political evil is not the cultivation of personal goodness, for personal goodness is essentially unworldly, while the specific problems that politics raises cannot be solved by goodness in itself. Let us therefore look more closely at Arendt's views on both aspects of this intractable problem, first on personal goodness and then on political responsibility.

Personal goodness

Thinking about morality in the wake of totalitarianism amid the ruins of Western traditions,⁷⁶ it seemed clear to Arendt that however fragile institutionalised morality had turned out to be, nevertheless some individual consciences had protected their bearers from evil-doing, and some individuals had still been capable of astonishing goodness.⁷⁷ The few people who stood firm in this way while the tide of totalitarianism was flowing round them were evidently sustained not by moral rules dictated by religious institutions or philosophical systems, but rather by the archetypal moral experiences from which those same rules were (in a complicated and distorted way) descended.⁷⁸ For Arendt believed that at the root of Western traditions lay two different kinds of fundamental moral experiences which could be traced to two commanding figures whom she often compared. For all her conviction that personal morality cannot provide a sufficient guard against political evil, there is no mistaking her respect for both Socrates and Jesus. Her long-continued meditations upon these two different patterns of personal excellence are related not only to her desire to go back beyond a worn-out tradition of thought to the authentic experiences from which it sprang, but also to her reflections on the tensions between philosophy and politics, and on the relationship between Christianity and Greek culture.

Let us now turn to her reflections on the two fountain-heads of personal moral experience, and see whether they can help us to a better understanding of her views on morality and politics.

⁷⁴ OR 82.

⁷⁵ OR 84. ⁷⁶ 'What is Authority?' 94-5.

⁷⁷ "'The Deputy'" 6. ⁷⁸ 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024594.

Socrates: philosophy and personal integrity

Arendt's lecture on 'Thinking and Moral Considerations'⁷⁹ contains the clearest statement of her view of Socrates as the discoverer of the secular conscience. At the beginning of this lecture she specifically linked her reflections to the trial of Eichmann, suggesting that Eichmann's apparent 'inability to think' had alerted her to the possible connections between philosophical reflection and moral judgement which she then traced in the case of Socrates.⁸⁰ Her essential point is that since, as Socrates discovered and as Arendt continually insisted, thinking consists in an endless 'internal dialogue' with oneself, living the life of the mind has moral implications. These implications are, as she herself stresses, of a rather paradoxical kind, for the very fact of thinking is possible only if one has withdrawn oneself from the world of human affairs into one's own mind – not the soundest base for action of any kind.⁸¹ Furthermore, she argued strenuously that in spite of the efforts of philosophers ever since Plato to extract solid results such as moral rules from the process of thinking, the mind's internal dialogue does not produce anything at all, and is more likely to undermine accepted rules with its incessant questioning. Nevertheless, the mere fact of being engaged in an internal dialogue with oneself is likely, she thought, to place limits on one's behaviour. When Socrates said that it was better to be wronged than to do wrong, he was commenting on the fact that he had to go on living with himself within the dialogue of his own mind. In the circumstances, a victim was a more congenial companion than a criminal. In other words, 'consciousness' transmuted itself directly into 'conscience'.⁸² Looking back at Eichmann, who seemed to have lacked any such internal dialogue, Arendt became convinced that no one who had possessed the personal conscience that accompanies the habit of thinking could have been carried along so unquestioningly by the trend of the times, or have fulfilled with such robot-like precision the appalling demands of Eichmann's bureaucratic function.

Up to a point, then, purely secular conscience, the conscience of the man who is self-conscious and therefore has to live with his own deeds, can be a safeguard against political evil, at any rate in extreme circumstances like

⁷⁹ *Social Research* 38/3 (Fall 1971) 417–46, largely incorporated in *L of M I* 166–93.

⁸⁰ 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' 417–19. However, the Eichmann trial must have tapped a deeper level of her reflections, because as far back as 1954 she had drawn attention to Socrates' contention that the worst fate is to be in disagreement with oneself, and commented that in this fundamental principle of non-contradiction, 'ethics, no less than logics (sic), has its origin' ('Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023405). (This final section of these lectures has been edited by Jerome Kohn and published in *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990) 73–103. Cf. 87.)

⁸¹ *L of M I* 80–3; Martin Heidegger at Eighty' (1971) in M. Murray (ed.), *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978) 299–303.

⁸² 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' 441–4.

those of Nazi Germany. In *The Life of the Mind* Arendt borrowed Jaspers' term, 'boundary situations'⁸³ to describe these cases. But while the Socratic conscience did present a safeguard against implication in extreme political evil, and while the case of Eichmann clearly showed the dangers of its opposite, thoughtlessness, Arendt did not suggest that conscience could be the answer to the political problems posed by totalitarianism. Its effects are too personal and too negative for it to provide any such political solution.⁸⁴ She maintained that although this kind of personal integrity may stop its possessor becoming implicated in evil, it is unlikely to prompt him to take positive political action because it is not sufficiently tied to the public world. In terms which have infuriated her critics, Arendt claimed that conscience is concerned with the *self* and its integrity, not with the world. We will take up this issue of 'selfishness' later. For the moment, however, it is clear that the point she is making is to do with the difference between being a good man and a good citizen. Being a good man in the Socratic sense is a matter of keeping clear of evil-doing, whereas being a good citizen means assuming shared responsibility for the public world.⁸⁵ She put the issue starkly in a paper on 'Collective Responsibility' for a symposium in 1968:

In the center of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the center of political considerations of conduct stands the world. If we strip moral imperatives of their religious connotations and origins we are left with the Socratic proposition: It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong . . . The political answer to the Socratic proposition would be: What is important in the world is that there be no wrong . . . Never mind who suffers it; your duty is to prevent it.⁸⁶

This was a message that Arendt continually repeated, and what gave her message its urgency was surely the conviction that whereas good men would be martyred rather than participate in the horrors of totalitarianism, only good citizens could have prevented it in the first place. All the same, as she reflected upon the political duty to take responsibility for the world, she recognised that once totalitarianism was in place, it might well be that no place remained for citizenship, and that retreat into as much personal integrity as one could salvage was the best one could do. In her radio talk on 'Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship', she said,

I think we shall have to admit that there exist extreme situations in which responsibility for the world, which is primarily a political one, cannot be assumed

⁸³ *L of M I* 192.

⁸⁴ 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024607. Cf. 'Philosophy and Politics: What is Political Philosophy?' (1969) Box 40, 024443 (not to be confused with Arendt's similarly entitled 1954 lecture course).

⁸⁵ 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' 440.

⁸⁶ 'Collective Responsibility' (1968) in J.W. Bernauer SJ (ed.), *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Boston/Dordrecht/Lancaster, Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) 47. Cf. 'Civil Disobedience' 62.

because political responsibility always presupposes at least a minimum of political power. Impotence, complete powerlessness, is, I think, a valid excuse.⁸⁷

She emphasised that it is only in extreme situations that this retreat from politics into personal integrity is unquestionably appropriate, and was anxious that her overall message of the duty of citizenship should not be diluted by it. 'The self as the ultimate criterion of moral conduct is politically a kind of emergency measure.'⁸⁸ Her reflections on Socratic morality are in fact part of a train of thought running right through her work and concerned with the tensions between philosophy and politics, between the life of the mind and life in the world, which we shall be exploring in a later chapter.

Before we can take up her troubling suggestion that conscience is unpolitical because it is concerned with 'the self', we need to turn from her reflections on Socrates and secular conscience and see what she has to say about the other person whom she recognised as a paradigm of moral experience: Jesus.

Jesus and pure goodness

The first point to be made here is that Arendt took for granted a 'demythologised' view of Jesus according to which he was not God incarnate but a unique and extraordinary man. Having spent her youth among radical theologians and been deeply influenced by Karl Jaspers, who included Jesus among the 'Great Philosophers', she evidently saw no need to argue the point.⁸⁹ Her assumption that Jesus had been misinterpreted within traditional Christianity reinforced her interest in the parallels with Socrates, who had also, she thought, been betrayed by his philosophical heirs. Each man stood at the head of an enormously influential tradition, with the death of Socrates having as much significance for Western philosophy as the death of Jesus for Western religion, but what became established in each tradition was not what the founder had taught. Socrates, who loved to seek wisdom, believed that no man could actually possess it, and yet the Platonic tradition stemming from his death professed to save men from ignorance and mere opinion by giving them absolute knowledge.⁹⁰ Jesus, who loved the practice of good works, believed that no

⁸⁷ 'Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship', *The Listener* (6 August 1964) 205; Cf. 'Collective Responsibility' 49.

⁸⁸ 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024602.

⁸⁹ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 36, 45, 61; K. Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers* (ed. H. Arendt, London, Hart-Davis, 1962) 74–96. Apart from their 'demythologising' approach, Arendt's interpretation and Jaspers' do not have a great deal in common.

⁹⁰ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023394–5. (*Social Research* 1990, 73–4).

man could actually *be* good,⁹¹ and yet the church stemming from his death offered salvation from sin.

When Arendt talks about 'goodness', therefore, it is as well to bear in mind this implicit distinction between Jesus himself and mainstream Christian traditions, and to realise that what she understands by 'goodness' goes far beyond ordinary Christian standards, let alone standards of common decency. The kind of goodness she is talking about is the radically demanding way of life practised and preached by Jesus, which requires, for example, that one should not just love one's neighbour as one's self, but even love one's *enemy*.⁹² But the most difficult aspect of Jesus' kind of goodness, in Arendt's view, is the complete self-forgetfulness it requires. This goes far beyond the Socratic version of conscience, which is a matter of consciously living with oneself and guarding one's personal integrity. The love of doing good taught by Jesus is incompatible with that sort of self-consciousness, and instead requires extreme self-forgetfulness – 'let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth'. In Arendt's words, 'goodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author; whoever sees himself performing a good work is no longer good, but at best a useful member of society or a dutiful member of a church'.⁹³ She often meditated on the radical loneliness of the person who truly loves goodness and therefore cannot afford the internal dialogue of the thinker. Goodness in her sense is an extreme and exceptional phenomenon even among Christians. She sometimes suggests that the superhumanly high standard of selflessness that Jesus set was counterproductive, making his followers so intensely aware of their own shortcomings that they transformed his teaching into a doctrine of salvation from sin, and became preoccupied with the state of their souls rather than with goodness or the love of God. Christianity therefore appears in her writings in two opposite forms, sometimes as the epitome of selflessness, sometimes as an introverted religion concerned primarily with the believer's own personal salvation.⁹⁴

Arendt's attitude to authentic Christian goodness was as ambivalent as her attitude to authentic philosophical thinking of the Socratic type. To suggest that she was hostile to goodness would be as much of a misinterpretation as to say that she was hostile to thinking, but in each case she saw tensions with the world of politics, and she was herself continually aware of the parallel. Just as her observations on the Socratic conscience

⁹¹ HC 75. ⁹² 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024621–2.

⁹³ HC 74.

⁹⁴ For Christianity as selflessness, see 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024622, 024635; For the Christian's concern with his own soul, see 'Love and Saint Augustine' (trans. E. B. Ashton) MS Box 66 033345; 'Collective Responsibility' 46. On the strains which led Paul to shift the focus of Christian doctrine, see 'Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024622–3; *L of M II* 66–72.

have their place within a long meditation on the sometimes supportive and sometimes hostile relations between the life of the mind and the public world, so her observations on goodness belong within broader reflections on the political implications of Christian and classical traditions. She is often thought of as an uncritical admirer of the Greeks, but this, as we have seen, is far too simple a judgement. As she was well aware, she owed crucial elements of her own political views to Judaeo-Christian traditions rather than to classical ones. Most fundamentally, the belief in the sacredness of the individual human being, which stood against slavery just as much as against concentration camps, had not been part of the Greek system of values but derived from the religious belief that human beings were creatures of God. Although, in view of the widespread modern loss of religious faith, she did not believe that this fundamental conviction could any longer rest on religious authority, and although she was convinced that only political institutions could guarantee the human rights which it demanded, she nevertheless recognised the debt that modern humanistic republicanism owed to Christianity.⁹⁵

As we have seen, she also attributed to Jesus a number of politically illuminating insights to do with the nature of action, notably that human beings have the power to perform 'miracles' (that is, to do things that are completely unexpected), and also that they are able to cancel past actions and make possible a new start through the power of forgiveness. Although she agrees that Jesus' discoveries in this field were made 'in a religious context' she finds them no less relevant to politics for that.⁹⁶ In a sense, then, she openly acknowledges a debt to Christianity alongside her debt to classical political experience. What makes her attitude ambivalent is that all these politically relevant aspects of Christianity were tied to a fundamental rejection of the world which entailed deep hostility to politics. To the early Christians, the world was a 'desert',⁹⁷ a place of travail in which to prepare for the real life to come, while even before Paul turned Christianity into a doctrine of salvation from this world,⁹⁸ Jesus' own authentic practice of pure goodness had been incompatible with politics.

For there is more at issue here than early Christian beliefs about the imminent end of the world. The problem, as Arendt saw it, was that politics is inescapably *public*, making possible and inevitable the disclosure of the individual who acts upon the public stage. But goodness, which dissolves if it is observed, is perpetually in hiding.⁹⁹ Attempts to bring it out into the spotlight of public life, like the French revolutionaries' attempts at a

⁹⁵ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought' (1st draft) MSS Box 64 1-1a; 'The Eggs Speak Up' 020914.

⁹⁶ HC 238-47; 'What is Freedom?' 167-8.

⁹⁷ 'Love and Saint Augustine' 033301.

⁹⁸ 'Love and Saint Augustine' 033345.

⁹⁹ HC 74-8.

politics of compassion and pureness of heart, can only lead to corruption and hypocrisy. Goodness cannot take public form, and may indeed be positively dangerous to politics because it is incompatible with taking responsibility for the public world. As Arendt put it towards the end of her life, Jesus knew better than anyone else how to act, but knew nothing about worldly institutions.¹⁰⁰ In the event, an institution of amazing authority and endurance was built upon the life and death of Jesus by Roman citizens who understood institutions in Roman terms, but that did not stop the spirit of Jesus from remaining as subversively anti-institutional as ever. Arendt seems to have found a certain *Schadenfreude* in observing the havoc wreaked within the Catholic Church when, against all expectations, a genuinely Jesus-like figure, Roncalli, became pope as John XXIII, called the Second Vatican Council, and demonstrated how subversive of worldly institutions the authentic following of Jesus actually was.¹⁰¹ In other words, pure goodness was not compatible even with *religious* institutions, let alone political ones.¹⁰²

In some unpublished lectures from 1963, repeating her familiar points about Machiavelli and the unworldly nature of Christian goodness, Arendt remarks that goodness is ‘the most anti-political of all activities, and yet – who will deny its importance?’¹⁰³ In other words, she did not seek to denigrate ‘goodness’ any more than she sought to ‘accuse compassion’. Instead, what she tried to do was to point to genuine tensions within moral experience, bearing constantly in mind the need to guard against political evils of the kind that she had witnessed. The answer to totalitarianism could not be the imitation of Christ, for although true Christians would die marvellously holy deaths in the concentration camps, they would be too unworldly to do anything effective to prevent the camps from coming into existence. Hence her continual stress upon our duty to take responsibility for the public world which we unavoidably share,¹⁰⁴ and hence her much misunderstood distinction between concern for the *world* and concern for the moral integrity of the *self*. Since it is widely believed, even by some of Arendt’s most respected commentators,¹⁰⁵ that she does intend to discredit conscience by suggesting that it is really a form of self-interest, we need to look at her most comprehensive discussion of the issue, in her essay on ‘Civil Disobedience’.

Her purpose in this essay, first published in 1970 and later incorporated in *Crises of the Republic*, was to argue that civil disobedience as practised by

¹⁰⁰ ‘Remarks’ to the American Society of Christian Ethics 011838.

¹⁰¹ ‘Remarks’ 011832–3; Cf. ‘Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli: a Christian on St Peter’s Chair from 1958 to 1963’, *Men in Dark Times* 57–69.

¹⁰² ‘Introduction into Politics’ (1963) MSS Box 41 023826. Cf. *HC* 77.

¹⁰³ ‘Introduction into Politics’ 023826.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Collective Responsibility’ 45, 50. ¹⁰⁵ e.g. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 96–107.

the Civil Rights movement and in the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in the USA was a specifically *political* activity, a matter of citizens acting together on questions of public interest. Her argument in this essay is part of her often-repeated concern that even in the USA, a state founded on good republican principles in the eighteenth century, the public dimension of life seemed to have been forgotten as politics was understood purely as the interplay of private interests. She points out that in most current discussions of the subject, civil disobedience is understood on the model of individual conscientious objection, best known to American traditions from the case of Thoreau, who refused to pay his poll tax to a government that permitted slavery. As she admits, the familiarity of discourse about individual conscience makes it natural to think of those who engage in civil disobedience simply as a collection of private individuals with tender consciences, whereas she wishes to argue instead that they should be seen as groups of public-spirited citizens, taking responsibility for the misdeeds of their republic and acting in the spirit of the US constitution by exercising a right of public dissent.

Thoreau, as Arendt demonstrates, did not take his stand on public principles of this kind. 'He argued his case not on the ground of a *citizen's* moral relation to the law, but on the ground of individual conscience and conscience's moral obligation.'¹⁰⁶ Like Socrates, who believed that to suffer wrong was better than to do it, Thoreau refused to be a party to injustice, and was prepared to accept the old adage about letting justice be done even if the world perishes. This is the position of 'the good man', but political actions and choices have another dimension which enormously complicates them, namely concern for 'the world' – that is, for the republic itself, its survival and its public interests. The complexity of the 'good citizen's' position is epitomised by Lincoln, whose overriding aim 'even in the struggle for the emancipation of the slaves, remained, as he wrote in 1862, "to save the Union and . . . not either to save or destroy slavery"'. In other words, superimposed upon the demands of personal conscience for Lincoln was the call of 'official duty'. When Arendt says that 'conscience is unpolitical'¹⁰⁷ and that it is concerned 'for the individual self and its integrity', she is not trying to suggest that conscientious people are 'selfish' in the sense of being unconcerned with the welfare of others. After all, her prime example is Thoreau, who was concerned for those suffering in slavery. Her intended contrast is not between the self and other people, but between the demands of personal conscience on one side and responsibility for the public world on the other.

In that particular essay Arendt is primarily concerned with the secular,

¹⁰⁶ 'Civil Disobedience' 60.

¹⁰⁷ 'Civil Disobedience' 60–1.

Socratic conscience, and she does not discuss the problems raised by conflicts between Christian goodness and politics. She does note, however, that the Christian tradition that conscience is the voice of God adds an anarchic element to an already individualistic situation in which conscience stands against conscience and there is no way of adjudicating between them. This combination of apparent authority with extreme subjectivity was another reason for reservations about conscience. After observing the workings of Adolf Eichmann's conscience, which apparently told him to carry out Hitler's 'final solution to the Jewish problem' with the utmost thoroughness, and made him feel shocked and guilty when, towards the end of the war, execution of the programme faltered, Arendt commented that 'to fall back on an unequivocal voice of conscience . . . signifies a deliberate refusal to take notice of the central moral, legal, and political phenomena of our century'.¹⁰⁸ Evidently listening to one's own conscience in the privacy of one's own soul cannot be a reliable guide for politics. Her claim is that those engaged in civil disobedience in the USA represented something different from this, and were responding to another set of obligations which overlap with personal moral obligation and greatly complicate the problems of moral judgement. These are the obligations a citizen bears for the public world for which he is collectively responsible with others – obligations which can only be decided in free discussion with others, not within the private conscience of each.

For Arendt to have started out from the analysis of totalitarianism and to reach the position of endorsing Machiavelli seems on the face of it so extraordinary that misunderstandings are scarcely surprising. Nevertheless, it must be reiterated that her route from the one to the other is continuous and intelligible, though tortuous and dimly-lit. Faced with the abyss of political evil represented by Nazism and Stalinism, the natural, simple reaction would have been to look for absolute moral rules according to which politics should be conducted and to resolve never again to stray from these rules. The trouble, as Arendt saw it, was that no such rules were available, not even within the churches. The generation picking up the pieces after totalitarianism had no such 'bannisters' to hold on to and had to do the best they could in the light of what was left of Western traditions of moral and political experience, without pretending to a certainty that was not available.¹⁰⁹ The greatest temptation for those recoiling from radical

¹⁰⁸ *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 132–3. On the anarchic nature even of Catholic consciences, and on Thomas Aquinas' conscience which allowed him to include among the joys of the blessed the pleasure of watching the sufferings of the damned in hell, see 'Remarks' to the American Society for Christian Ethics, 011834.

¹⁰⁹ 'Remarks' 011833–4; 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 313–14; 'The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism' (1953) MSS Box 68 13.

evil was to retreat into personal relations, where morality seemed relatively clear, and to take one's political cues from there.¹¹⁰ But attempts to publicise and generalise private experiences could be disastrous, because personal morality, concerned with one's relation to one's self and to one's neighbours, did not include concern for the establishment and survival of sound political institutions, which alone could stand against totalitarianism. Such political institutions demand commitments of their own, and these may on occasion conflict with the demands of personal morality. What finally brings Arendt into Machiavelli's ambit is her conviction that personal morality cannot solve the dilemmas that arise out of the very nature of politics itself. It is to these dilemmas that we must now turn.

Political responsibility and its moral dilemmas

Karl Jaspers, Arendt's teacher and friend, regretted that she did not pay more attention to the thought of Max Weber, whose reverent disciple he remained. Nevertheless, she was undoubtedly aware of Weber's classic discussion in 'Politics as a Vocation' of the moral dilemmas of politics, and knew that Weber also liked to cite Machiavelli's adage about loving his city more than his soul.¹¹¹ To Weber, the source of moral dilemmas is the fact, as he saw it, that violence is at the heart of all politics. In a sense Arendt's position is completely different, for, as we shall see, she defied the German tradition of 'realism' by maintaining that it is action-as-speech rather than government that constitutes true politics; that agreement and consent, not domination, found republics, and that acting in concert, not violence, creates power. From a traditional perspective, that is, hers is a demilitarised, 'soft' view of the nature of politics. All the same, her view is no closer to modern liberalism than Weber's. Not only was it obvious to her, as it must have been to anyone living in the mid twentieth century and well acquainted with history, that up to this moment in human experience politics and violence have always been entangled; more to the point, she did not believe in progress, and did not share the barely conscious assumption of modern publics that with the growth of prosperity and enlightenment, and in spite of setbacks on the way ranging from concentration camps and nuclear weapons to mounting crime-rates and international terrorism, we are somehow moving toward a world in which violence will no longer exist. On the contrary, she seems to have taken for granted that violence is part of the

¹¹⁰ 'On Humanity in Dark Times', 11-7; *L of M II* 200.

¹¹¹ 'Civil Disobedience' 61: *OR* 37, 286; Arendt in A. Klein (ed.), *Dissent, Power and Confrontation* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1971) 29; M. Weber 'Politics as a Vocation', *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948) 126, 78, 121.

human condition, although something which can on occasion, in favourable circumstances, be kept out of politics.¹¹²

The most prominent aspect of political violence is, of course, war, and it is clear that, like so many in a generation which had seen in the war against Nazism an unusually unequivocal example of a just war, Arendt was no pacifist. While campaigning for a Jewish army to join the fight against Hitler on equal terms she had gone so far as to declare that a people that does not defend itself is no more than an animated corpse.¹¹³ The advent of nuclear weapons put a different complexion upon the matter. Twenty years later, reflecting upon the implications of the atom bomb for war and politics, she remarked that 'the war question' had been at the back of her mind 'for many years'.¹¹⁴ It was not a question to which she saw any simple answer, for although political violence may be moved aside, it is unlikely to be dispensed with altogether. Meditating upon total war in the aftermath of Hiroshima, she acknowledged that the Greeks who invented free politics had also set an example of a war of annihilation, the destruction of Troy, that had reverberated down the centuries. She even suggested that the extreme cruelty of Greek foreign politics might be traceable to the freedom of the city-state, in that the practice of *ruling* in a humane and not entirely exploitative manner was outside Greek experience.¹¹⁵

Similarly, she was acutely aware of the extent to which the non-violent politics of speech practised in the Greek polis presupposed but at the same time was corrupted by the pre-political violence of slavery.¹¹⁶ Even the marked improvement in modern societies in the treatment of those who had previously been exposed to constant private violence, namely women and labourers, seemed to her more a matter of shifting violence from private to public life than of eradicating it. The modern state, gathering into its hands a monopoly of coercion, had pacified its own domains to an unprecedented extent, but had at the same time developed the means of violence to levels of

¹¹² 'On Violence' 110; 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 334. Arendt did reflect upon the changed situation created by the advent of nuclear war: see *OR* 13–18; 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' (c. 1957) MSS Box 60 *passim*. For further evidence of her pessimism or realism, see her observation in 1971 that freedom is not to be expected in large areas of the world because of material conditions: Klein, *Dissent, Power and Confrontation* 132.

¹¹³ 'Die Juedische Armee' 3. Cf. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 171, 173. The contrast implicitly made at this stage between the dignity of a good clean fight and the indignity of being a helpless victim has affinities with Fanon's defence of anti-colonial violence in *The Wretched of the Earth*. It is therefore notable that (unlike Jean Paul Sartre) she was decidedly cautious about Fanon's book during the period when it was a sacred text for the radical young. See 'On Violence' 116, 122–3, 168, 172.

¹¹⁴ 'Revolution and Freedom: A Lecture' in H. Tramer (ed.), *In zwei Welten: Siegfried Moses zum fünfundsiebzigsten Geburtstag* (Tel Aviv, Bitan, 1962) 581.

¹¹⁵ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) section III 46–7.

¹¹⁶ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023368; *OR* 114.

destructiveness they would never have reached if they had remained in the possession of heads of households.¹¹⁷

Behind Arendt's meditations on the tension between politics and goodness, therefore, lies a belief in the inescapability of violence as deep as that of Weber when, in the aftermath of the First World War and amid the appeals of pacifism and revolutionary millenarianism, he reflected upon politics as a vocation. In Arendt's own time, the scale of violence in politics was so monstrous that the temptation to draw the early Christian conclusion that 'the world is governed by demons'¹¹⁸ and to wash one's hands of it must have been very strong, particularly for anyone as familiar with early Christianity as Arendt. In spite of this she had no doubt that there is a duty to resist political evil, even though this resistance may well involve guilt.¹¹⁹ Unlike Kant, who believed 'that evil by its very nature is self-destructive', Arendt agreed with Machiavelli 'that evil will spread wildly if men do not resist it even at the risk of doing evil themselves'.¹²⁰ She greatly admired Gandhi's use of non-violent resistance in India, but she did not believe that it could have been effective against an enemy as ruthless as Hitler or Stalin.¹²¹ She therefore admired the French Resistance¹²² and the attempts to assassinate Hitler, while recognising the moral dilemmas involved in any such action. One particularly difficult problem was the question of when it was one's duty to stay clear of a particular political situation, and when one should become engaged at the risk of guilt. 'We know from recent experiences that active and sometimes heroic resistance to evil governments comes much rather from men and women who participated in them than from those who were innocent of any guilt.'¹²³

It must be reiterated that these acknowledgements of the genuine moral dilemmas of politics do not amount to an endorsement of the vulgar 'Machiavellianism' which, as we saw earlier, was anathema to Arendt. She consistently opposed the idea that all means are permissible in a good cause, and had even less sympathy with the German tradition of *Staatsraison*, according to which the state develops according to its own laws, which are above the level of morality.¹²⁴ She seems not to have realised how difficult it

¹¹⁷ 'Einleitung: Der Sinn von Politik' 025 a-b.

¹¹⁸ Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation' 123.

¹¹⁹ 'Collective Responsibility' 46, 48; 'Philosophy and Politics' (1969) 024443.

¹²⁰ *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982) 51.

¹²¹ 'On Violence' 152, though Cf. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 154 on Danish non-violent resistance to the 'Final Solution'.

¹²² 'Preface: the Gap between Past and Future', *Between Past and Future* 4.

¹²³ 'Collective Responsibility' 48.

¹²⁴ 'From Machiavelli to Marx' (1965) MSS Box 39 023458.

would be for her readers to grasp the difference between her brand of Machiavellianism and the kind she denounced.¹²⁵

The problem here is, I think, that the kind of moral consequentialism with which we are most familiar does not distinguish between two claims that are very different, particularly in politics: (a) when looking back on an action, one should judge it by its results; and (b) when deciding what to do, one should choose the course of action that will have the best results. These claims may appear to be symmetrical but are actually quite different, precisely because the judgement in case (a) is based on known events, whereas the decision in case (b) rests on predictions that are extremely speculative. If, for example, one is looking back at a war and considering whether or not it was a just war, one may quite rationally debate whether or not, on balance, the harm that it caused was proportionate to the wrong it was intended to right. But the statesmen taking the decision to go to war in the first place do not and cannot have that information, and their best endeavours at informed prediction are all too likely to be proved wrong. This obvious point is strangely neglected in political theory, perhaps because of the tendency to think of politics in terms of a controlled 'making' rather than in terms of the real uncertainties of 'acting'. At any rate, Arendt's meditations on the nature of action among plural men left her with no illusions about the ability of decision-makers to weigh the costs of their decisions against the benefits. Hard choices are inescapable in politics, but what she was opposed to was the impulse to play God by taking unnecessary moral risks. A good cause, or the mere hope of good results, is not enough to justify evil deeds here and now. Machiavellianism in her sense becomes appropriate only when one is caught in a situation where wrong is unavoidable, and she wrote about it precisely because she was very close to such situations.

Although she believed that Machiavellian choices were inescapable in many political situations, she was acutely aware that a belief of this kind could be misused to excuse crimes and to romanticise those who bear the burden of guilt.¹²⁶ In her talk on 'Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship' she acknowledged that some former Nazi functionaries had used this line after the war, claiming that they had stayed in their jobs to prevent worse happening, in contrast to those who retreated into private

¹²⁵ She did in fact make the crucial distinction explicit, but only in an aside in some unpublished lectures. Pondering on whether in some political circumstances one may be obliged to do wrong in order to prevent a greater wrong, she specifically dissociates this kind of practical dilemma from the notion that one is justified in doing evil that good may come. The point is that one can never be sure this hypothetical future good *will* come ('Some Questions of Moral Philosophy' 024616).

¹²⁶ As in Weber's picture of the true politician, who appears to bear the sins of the world: see 'Politics as a Vocation' 126–8.

life and, so the ex-Nazis would say, 'shirked all responsibility and thought only of themselves, of the salvation of their precious souls'. The argument which she here attributes to the ex-Nazis may sound dangerously close to her own position, but she goes on to point out how inappropriate it is to their situation. To have the right to use such an argument, those concerned would, after all, have to be able to point to attempts they had actually made to act against the regime. The ex-Nazis repeated the argument that, confronted with two evils, one must choose the lesser, rather than shirking responsibility and refusing to choose at all. Apart from the comment that to call the things that were happening in Nazi Germany the *lesser* evil is a bit rich, Arendt replies that the danger of this sort of argument is that 'those who choose the lesser evil forget quickly that they chose evil'. Her conclusion is that behaving decently in extreme political situations is not something that can be reduced to rules or slogans. We can only 'start thinking and judging instead of applying categories and formulas'.¹²⁷

The emphasis on 'judging' in this passage can help us to understand one of her reasons for rejecting 'moral' approaches to politics, at any rate where these meant the application of general rules or inflexible criteria. It was clear to her that blinkered adherence to rigid formulae was not an adequate response to the dilemmas of politics. The best we can do is to make judgements on the basis of the situation we find ourselves in, trying not to allow our judgement to be distorted by maxims and rules that are not appropriate.¹²⁸ The experience of this century's crises teach 'the simple fact that there are no general standards to determine our judgements unfailingly, no general rules under which to subsume the particular cases with any degree of certainty', and as a result 'we must try to think and to judge and to act' without these supports'.¹²⁹

Political bulwarks against political evil

Our attempts so far to trace the intricate windings of Arendt's thought may perhaps have done something to dispel the charge of irresponsibility that is sometimes levelled at her, but may have left in its place the impression that her view of the world was classically existentialist. The predicament of man is inescapably tragic: flung into the world, he finds himself 'condemned to freedom' and yet unable to achieve what he sets out to achieve; with no rules to guide him, guilty if he acts and guilty if he does not. Clearly, Arendt's

¹²⁷ 'Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship' 186.

¹²⁸ Cf. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Part II: 'Interpretive Essay' by R. Beiner; R. Beiner, *Political Judgment* (London, Methuen, 1983) 11–19.

¹²⁹ 'Remarks on "The Crisis Character of Modern Society"', *Christianity and Crisis* 26/9 (30 May 1966) 113.

debts to Heidegger and Jaspers, and beyond them to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, were such that the echoes sound throughout her thinking. This quasi-existentialist stand is particularly conspicuous in some unpublished reflections from the 1950s on the 'desert' of worldlessness in which we are forced to live. Within this 'desert', she says, are still to be found 'oases' of art, philosophy and personal relations, but we must not try to escape into them permanently: to do so is to carry the desert sand into them also. Instead, what we need is 'endurance', including the fortitude to endure doubt and lack of certainty. 'Only those who can endure the passion of living under conditions of the desert, can be trusted with summing up in themselves the courage which lies at the root of all action.'¹³⁰

Nevertheless, if Arendt's thought is existentialist, it is (in the words of Lewis and Sandra Hinchman) 'existentialism politicized'.¹³¹ Alongside the existentialist feeling that to be human in the twentieth century is to be flung into a howling wilderness, two linked convictions give Arendt's thought its characteristically political flavour. The first is her vivid sense that the human predicament is not solitary but plural. In striking contrast to the focus in Heidegger on man's loneliness before death,¹³² the most significant feature of the human condition for Arendt is *birth* into a world peopled by others, so that man is not solitary, but shares the earth with the rest of the human race. In view of the things that human beings had just been doing to one another in Nazi Germany, this might not seem cause for congratulation; but even in the first edition of *Totalitarianism* Arendt affirms human plurality as a blessing and a source of salvation. On the final page of that first edition she calls upon us to feel gratitude for this condition, and to recognise 'the tremendous bliss . . . that not a single man but Men inhabit the earth'. The book ends with a quotation from the New Testament which she addresses to the despairing survivors of totalitarianism: 'Do thyself no harm; for we are all here.'¹³³

What makes her thought specifically political, however, is not merely her sense of human plurality, but her further conviction that its implications and its saving grace against the threat of totalitarianism do not lie in personal relationships between a few huddling together against the dark,¹³⁴ but in a more ambitious possibility which human plurality offers us: the possibility of taking political action and, amongst us, building and guarding political structures to house men and to protect them against the wilderness. Totalitarianism had left human beings without moral certain-

¹³⁰ 'Lectures on the History of Political Theory' 024090-092.

¹³¹ L.P. and S.K. Hinchman, 'Existentialism Politicized: Arendt's Debt to Jaspers', *Review of Politics* 53/3 (1991) especially 447-9.

¹³² e.g. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1953) 252; Cf. *L of M I* 162.

¹³³ OTI 439, quoted from *Acts* 16: 28.

¹³⁴ 'On Humanity in Dark Times' 13.

ties, in need of 'a new foundation for human community'.¹³⁵ But Arendt's contention, adumbrated in *Totalitarianism* and developed further in her later writings, particularly *On Revolution*, was that although no absolute moral rules exist which could provide such a foundation, and although even the most authentic of personal moral experiences cannot supply it, nevertheless a foundation for sound human coexistence and a guard against totalitarianism *can* be found in the fundamental human condition of plurality itself, in acceptance of the fact that we share the earth with others who are both like and unlike ourselves. 'The only given condition for the establishment of rights is the plurality of men; rights exist because we inhabit the earth together with other men.'¹³⁶ This is not to say that there is anything automatic about the establishment of these rights: this again depends upon plurality, upon human beings acting together and guaranteeing rights to one another by building public institutions to embody them.¹³⁷

The concentration camps had demonstrated that human beings can on occasion do things so radically evil that punishment is inadequate and forgiveness impossible,¹³⁸ but outside such situations it seemed to Arendt that human plurality provided two fundamental capacities that could provide a basis for sound politics: the ability to forgive the past and start again, and the capacity to make promises for the future and keep them. The point about forgiveness is that it is an alternative to revenge, and therefore breaks the chain of automatic action and reaction in which human affairs so easily become trapped,¹³⁹ making it possible to clear the ground and start afresh. As she readily acknowledged, Jesus had discovered the potentialities of forgiveness within the close community of his followers and had articulated it in religious terms. Within Christianity, what makes forgiveness possible is love, which is totally unworldly and is definitely not a political principle. Arendt proposes, however, that love is not in fact necessary for forgiveness, the willingness to break with past misdeeds and start again. All that is required is mutual *respect*, which she describes as 'a kind of "friendship" without intimacy and without closeness; it is a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us'.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ OTI 436.

¹³⁶ OTI 437.

¹³⁷ There are striking similarities between these neglected aspects of Arendt's thought and the anti-foundationalist politics elaborated by Benjamin Barber in *Strong Democracy and The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988). ¹³⁸ HC 241.

¹³⁹ HC 236–43. Arendt may have been thinking of relations between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East, caught in a seemingly inexorable process of wrong and retaliation. On Arendt, responsibility and forgiveness, see the thoughtful essay by R.W. Smith, 'Redemption and Politics', *Political Science Quarterly* 86/2 (June 1971) 205–31.

¹⁴⁰ HC 243; Cf. 'On Humanity in Dark Times' *passim*.

Where this respect is granted, human plurality makes possible the most powerful of political resources, promising. Arendt lays great stress upon the ability of human beings to come to agreements, to make mutual promises, and, so long as they act according to the fundamental political principle of keeping faith,¹⁴¹ to establish 'islands of predictability'¹⁴² in the turbulent ocean of human affairs. Up to a point she certainly agreed with Sartre that human beings as individuals are 'condemned to be free'. As she remarked in *The Human Condition*, 'Man's inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself . . . is the price human beings pay for freedom.'¹⁴³ But what marks off her theory from existentialism and makes it specifically political is the discovery that however unpredictable and unreliable individual impulses and intentions may be, agreements made out in the world that lies *between* men can dispel this 'darkness of the human heart' and build something much more lasting and reliable, laws and institutions which can house men, grant them rights and protect them from one another.

The importance of these 'lasting institutions' built upon agreements is one of the main themes of *On Revolution*. The American Constitution, whatever its deficiencies,¹⁴⁴ was for Arendt a triumphant example of such a 'lasting institution', of a 'house where freedom can dwell',¹⁴⁵ and she describes how the way in which it was established – by agreement, not by a violent, 'Machiavellian' process of fabrication – had been foreshadowed by the Mayflower Covenant with which the Pilgrim Fathers had bound themselves on their first arrival in America.¹⁴⁶

We shall be looking at her reflections on the founding of republics in the next chapter, but one implication of her stress on plurality that is relevant here is that human beings do not need to be good *as individuals* to be able to establish a world of institutions in their midst. Moralists have always tried to make men good by purifying their motives and intentions, and political reformers have often supposed that the way to political justice lies through a change of heart or even a 'new humanity'. But Arendt argued that human plurality makes it possible to establish agreements, laws and institutions without needing to enquire into the 'darkness' of the human heart or entertaining vain hopes of reforming it. The American Founding Fathers did not believe in the goodness of man or the perfectibility of human nature, but they understood the true promise of politics: that 'hope for man in his singularity lay in the fact that not man but men inhabit the earth and form a

¹⁴¹ Whatever affinity Arendt had with Machiavelli, it was with the Florentine citizen rather than the teacher of duplicity to princes: a willingness to make and keep promises is 'the only strictly moral duty of the citizen' – 'Civil Disobedience' 92. ¹⁴² HC 244.

¹⁴³ HC 244; J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York, Philosophical Library, 1956) 439.

¹⁴⁴ OR 232–9. ¹⁴⁵ OR 35. ¹⁴⁶ OR 172–6.

world between them. It is human worldliness that will save men from the pitfalls of human nature.’¹⁴⁷ There are echoes here of Kant’s remark that even devils, provided that they were rational, could establish a just republic, and Arendt’s gloss on this text is that ‘no moral conversion of man . . . is needed, required, or hoped for in order to bring about political change for the better’.¹⁴⁸

One of her main reasons for trying to draw a line between politics and private morality is precisely to direct attention away from what goes on inside the individual soul, and instead to stress what happens outside and between individuals: institutions rather than will,¹⁴⁹ actions rather than motives. This is one of the reasons why she distinguishes goodness from ‘greatness’. When she cites Machiavelli on glory versus goodness, she takes him to mean that the latter is (as we saw earlier) something that cannot possibly shine in public, because publicity would destroy its authentic quality. However, she specifically denies that *bad* acts can be glorious,¹⁵⁰ and we should perhaps bear this in mind when reading the passage in *The Human Condition* that has probably caused more bafflement and revulsion than any other, namely her apparently approving citation of Pericles’ boast that the Athenians had left behind them ‘everlasting remembrance . . . of their good and their evil deeds’. She comments that ‘unlike human behaviour – which the Greeks, like all civilised people, judged according to “moral standards”, taking into account motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other – action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary’. In context, the stress of the passage is chiefly upon the contrast between the actual *deeds* that appear in the public world, and their obscure antecedents and consequences: ‘Greatness can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement.’¹⁵¹

‘Greatness’ and ‘glory’ are such thoroughly unfamiliar concepts in the modern world that we find ourselves at a loss to know how to apply them. It would be unwise to suppose, however, that Arendt intended simply to endorse the Athenian attitude to such matters. Her unpublished papers contain an extended discussion of Pericles which is much more critical than that just cited. In some lectures on ‘Philosophy and Politics: What is Political Philosophy?’, delivered at the New School for Social Research in 1969, she reiterated her interpretation of the Greek polis as an organisation founded to make it possible for the citizens to immortalise themselves, but

¹⁴⁷ OR 96, 175.

¹⁴⁸ *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* 17–18.

¹⁴⁹ On the contrast between the French Revolutionaries’ appeal to Rousseau’s General Will and the American reliance on objective institutions, see OR 76, 157.

¹⁵⁰ HC 77.

¹⁵¹ HC 205–6.

pointed out that the practical implication of this quest for glory was the Athenian aspiration to rule all Hellas. 'From the passion for distinction arises the passion to dominate', and Pericles in particular was possessed by 'the hubris of power', especially in his invocation of the glory of 'evil deeds'.¹⁵² Interestingly, Arendt contrasts Pericles' outlook with a different Athenian understanding of politics, that of Solon the lawgiver, who specifically insisted that no city could escape retribution for evil-doing. The difference between Pericles and Solon was, she says, the difference between 'the striving for excellence at any price or putting this within limits'.¹⁵³ One of the few comparatively modern cases where we can be sure of her judgement of greatness and glory is of course that of the American Founding Fathers, who were relatively uncompromised by evil deeds.

When Arendt meditated on the Founding Fathers and the power of agreements between free men, one of the points which struck her was that because human beings exist in the plural they have available to them a set of bulwarks against evil which are more reliable than personal goodness, namely the institutions they can establish amongst themselves by acting together. But if one implication of plurality is that we should concentrate in politics on the actions and institutions that appear in the world, not on the feelings and motives that are hidden in the darkness of the human heart, a second implication is that such worldly institutions are indispensable. If men are to be protected from the danger of a recurrence of totalitarianism, they need the housing of a solid structure of rights guaranteed by law, and since constitutions are only pieces of paper unless they are upheld by constantly renewed consent, the citizens need to understand the importance of such institutions and be prepared to value the conservation of their republic above their private interests.

Arendt's wariness about personal morality in politics has its place within this more general conviction that republican institutions are both immensely precious and alarmingly fragile. It was all very well for Thoreau to say that individuals must follow their consciences even if the cost of this was the downfall of the republic.¹⁵⁴ Arendt could not share such a view because experience had taught her how easily republics can collapse, and how much worse what replaces them may be. In challenging the role of conscience in politics, however, she was not calling for unprincipled action, but action inspired by *public* principles. Her own heroes and heroines were fighters for principles of this kind: the heroes of the Dreyfus case, Bernard Lazare, 'a partisan of the impartiality of the law'¹⁵⁵ and Clemenceau, defender of 'such "abstract" ideas as justice, liberty and civic virtue';¹⁵⁶ Judah Magnes,

¹⁵² 'Philosophy and Politics' (1969) 024432-5.

¹⁵³ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1969) 024437.

¹⁵⁴ 'Civil Disobedience' 61.

¹⁵⁵ OTI 120, quoting Péguy.

¹⁵⁶ OTI 110.

who strove for justice for Jews *and* Arabs in Palestine;¹⁵⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, who fought for justice and political freedom. Indeed, Arendt actually speaks of the 'moral' commitment of some of these heroes.¹⁵⁸ Challenged at a conference in 1972 on how this related to her Machiavellian separation of 'goodness' from politics, she suggested that the crucial distinction was whether or not the person – Rosa Luxemburg in this case – was interested in *being* good as a person, or in the world and injustice within it. 'The decisive thing is whether your own motivation is clear – for the world – or for yourself, by which I mean for your soul.'¹⁵⁹ The relevant criterion is whether the activities in question are outward- or inward-looking; whether the concerns in question are public ones, dictated neither by private interests nor by personal conscience.

Many of her critics would retort that her attempt to distinguish public principle from personal conscience is entirely futile, since such principles must antedate the institutions they uphold and must come from the same authoritative source as personal morality – whatever that source may be. But this is precisely what Arendt's meditations on human plurality led her to deny. As we shall see when we look at her reflections on 'authority' in the next chapter, she came to believe that political institutions did not need to derive authority from some absolute outside themselves, whether religious, philosophical or moral (a message of comfort in a world devoid of such absolutes). Instead, authority itself was essentially political, and depended on the acts and agreements of men.

On this point, Arendt once again found inspiration in Montesquieu. Within Western traditions, laws have come to be regarded as commands passed down from higher authority, but Arendt reads the original Roman word *lex* as meaning 'connection' or 'relationship' and notes that Montesquieu alone among political thinkers revived the ancient Roman sense of the word when he defined laws as 'rapports'. The importance of this is that 'rapports' or 'connections' can exist between people on the same level, rather than implying some superior authority: the foundations of law can lie in agreements between men rather than in obedience to gods.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Young-Bruhl, *Hannah Arendt* 225–33.

¹⁵⁸ 'Rosa Luxemburg: 1871–1919', *Men in Dark Times* 50–2; 'Magnes, the Conscience of the Jewish People' 3; 'Peace or Armistice in the Near East?' 216–17.

¹⁵⁹ 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 311. Two years earlier, praising the student activists of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, she stated approvingly that they had acted 'almost exclusively from moral motives' ('Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' in *Crises of the Republic* 203). This stress on 'motives' is uncharacteristic, and it may possibly be significant that both of these quotations are from reported speech rather than from Arendt's own essays.

¹⁶⁰ *OR* 188. Arendt also discussed the *deficiencies* of the Roman concept of law: 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' 26: and the different Greek view of law, which also saw it as something man-made (*OR* 186–7; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition', 2nd draft, section III).

Having begun her journey from the collapse in Nazi Germany of 'morality' in its sense of customary behaviour, and having cited Montesquieu's warning of the fragility of societies relying only on customs without the solid props of laws and citizens, she came to the conclusion that political agreements may not only supply the place of collapsed moral certainties, but even (in a reverse of the conventional order of priority) become the basis upon which new moral certainties may be built. In some brief but very interesting 'Remarks on the Crisis Character of Modern Society' in 1966 she first reiterated her conviction that we do not now possess any general rules and will have to manage without them, and went on to sound this note:

Moral truth . . . resembles more the validity of agreements than the compelling validity of scientific statements. These agreements determine the action of all when they have become mores, morality, customs with their own standards of conduct that finally become self-evident . . . I personally do not doubt that out of the turmoil of being confronted with reality without the help of precedent, that is, of tradition and authority, there will finally arise some new code of conduct.¹⁶¹

This can come about by talking, by making decisions, and by means of 'new agreements between ourselves as well as between the nations of the earth, which then might become customs, rules, standards that are frozen again into what is called morality'.

Some support for Arendt's political antifoundationalism¹⁶² may perhaps be found in contemporary developments in the area of human rights. The notion of human rights is descended from the eighteenth-century belief in *natural* rights which were not dependent upon human action but were bestowed by 'Nature and Nature's God'. By the beginning of the twentieth century, God had retreated, leaving behind a 'nature red in tooth and claw' that did not bestow any rights apart from the right of the strongest. Human equality and possession of rights turned out to be not a fact but an opinion, and was disregarded accordingly. But after the catastrophe of totalitarianism, the old idea emerged in a new form. Those picking up the pieces were quite sure that they did not want to live in a world where human beings could be utterly denied rights, and they agreed on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations in December 1948. It is easy to dismiss this as no more than empty rhetoric: but what has gradually become apparent, at any rate in some areas of the world, is a process whereby *talk* between political actors turns into something more than talk – at best into actual institutions, like the European Court of Human Rights; more tentatively, into political

¹⁶¹ 'Remarks on "The Crisis Character of Modern Society"' 113–14.

¹⁶² Compare Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy* 65: 'democracy may exist entirely without moral foundations; it may be the political answer to the question of moral uncertainty – the form of interaction for people who cannot agree on absolutes'.

agreements with a limited degree of political effectiveness, like the Helsinki accords to which the Czech dissidents appealed in the 1980s; more generally still, into a public space within which political pressure in the name of human rights can be put upon tyrannical governments. An 'opinion' or 'preference'¹⁶³ which would be merely subjective as held by a solitary thinker, has turned into something objective because it has appeared in the public space formed by the talk and actions of plural statesmen and citizens.

Conclusion

According to George Kateb, Arendt sought to exclude from politics love, goodness, conscience, compassion, pity, and thereby 'the largest part of moral inhibition', because of her 'single-minded adherence to the unique and supreme existential achievement of political action as revelatory speech'.¹⁶⁴ In this chapter I have tried to show that Arendt did not start from an 'ideal conception' of politics and rule out goodness and the rest because they did not fit this ideal. Instead she started from the experience of totalitarianism, trying to find bulwarks against it and reflecting on the difficulties and complexities of doing so. Some of these difficulties and complexities arose from the terrifying ambiguity of totalitarianism itself – the fact, that is, that it appeared on both the Right and the Left. Faced in the first place with Nazism, she saw that conventional morality had been no impediment to political evil. Personal morality in either of its authentic forms, as Socratic conscience or as Christian goodness, could indeed prevent individuals from going along with it, but neither was sufficiently involved with public affairs to prevent totalitarianism happening. The only adequate answer was, she concluded, a political one: the agreement of citizens to establish and maintain a republic based on equal rights for all.

Ever since the French Revolution, the ideals Arendt wanted to reassert against Nazism had been the preserve of the Left, but the occurrence of totalitarianism on that side of the political spectrum too led her to reflect upon the pitfalls of the revolutionary tradition itself. Machiavellian calculations about the need to break eggs in order to make omelettes had reached their nemesis in Stalinist terror, while the compassion for the unfortunate that led many to become entangled with such evils had already appeared during the French Revolution, and demonstrated in the Terror how politics based on personal feeling becomes corrupted. In opposition to this politics of emotions, Arendt argued that politics should be informed by principles, but that principled political action differs from personal morality, since the latter is not concerned with the public world but with

¹⁶³ 'Truth and Politics' (1967) in *Between Past and Future* 247.

¹⁶⁴ Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* 28–9.

relations between private persons or with the relation of a person to himself. Her position is certainly not without difficulties, but the objections to which it lies open are not those that are commonly alleged. She does not in fact repudiate conscience or discredit compassion, still less disregard the danger of totalitarianism in her pursuit of a politics without morals. A more promising line of criticism might be to suggest not that she repudiates morality, but that her political recommendations are more reliant upon moral commitments than she cares to admit. Let us conclude this discussion with a brief look at this objection.

At the end of her discussion of Action in *The Human Condition*, Arendt makes the suggestion that politics has a kind of morality of its own, arising out of the conditions of action amongst plural human beings.

In so far as morality is more than the sum total of *mores*, of customs and standards of behavior solidified through tradition and valid on the ground of agreements . . . it has, at least politically, no more to support itself than the good will to counter the enormous risks of action by readiness to forgive and to be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them. These moral precepts are the only ones that are not applied to action from the outside, from some supposedly higher faculty or from experiences outside action's own reach. They arise, on the contrary, directly out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking . . .¹⁶⁵

Now, if this were to be taken to mean that we can *deduce* from the fact of human plurality political maxims such as 'promises ought to be kept' or 'fellow human beings ought to be treated with respect', it would be highly questionable. The mere fact of plurality cannot in itself ground any such maxims. The observation that other people are indeed sharing the earth with us can just as well lead some of us to regard the others as prey to be deceived, exploited or wiped out, and these are indeed the practical conclusions to which political actors have often come.¹⁶⁶ Plurality in itself does not entail equal rights: so is Arendt smuggling in from outside politics a moral absolute about the equal worth of all human beings?

In all probability Arendt's own conviction of human equality did indeed have its base outside politics, in religion. But this is not to say that she smuggled a religiously based moral absolute into her political thinking. The point is that Arendt (in this respect true to her existentialist antecedents) was at one and the same time sure of her own convictions *and* sure that no one's personal convictions can be authoritative for politics. Such convictions are subjective, which does not make them any less demanding for the subject in question, but does mean that they cannot simply be generalised to produce authoritative moral rules.¹⁶⁷ However committed she herself might be to the ideas of equal human worth and equal human rights, she

¹⁶⁵ *HC* 245–6. ¹⁶⁶ *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 255–6.

¹⁶⁷ 'Civil Disobedience' 64–6.

certainly did not suppose that this was something that could be demonstrated or deduced from human plurality.

This is an issue that she discusses in *On Revolution* while reflecting on the Founding Fathers' search for a source of authority for their foundation. She points out that the very words of the Declaration of Independence, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .' and so on, themselves let the cat out of the bag. Jefferson wanted to strengthen his claims by giving them the dignity of self-evident rational truth, but, knowing perfectly well that human equality does not in fact carry the irresistible conviction of rational deduction, he added 'We hold these truths . . .', showing that their authority lay in the agreement of those who asserted them, not in self-evident truth.¹⁶⁸ Elsewhere she made this point even more explicitly, saying that although after many centuries of moral development it had become possible for Jefferson to assert human equality as a self-evident truth, 'this, too, is in fact an agreement'.¹⁶⁹

I have stressed throughout this chapter that the spur to Arendt's meditations on politics and morality was the experience of political evil in her time. But have her meditations any practical outcome? Since she often spoke of the endless, inconclusive nature of thought, and explicitly denied that the political thinker can tell the political actor what to do,¹⁷⁰ it is clear that any notion of the unity of theory and practice was far from her mind. Nevertheless, her meditations do have practical implications, not in the sense of logical deductions but by way of warnings and recommendations. Her writings contain warnings of the danger of certain kinds of political motives, notably pity, and the drawbacks in some circumstances of a certain kind of political orientation, one directed by private conscience. Implicitly, they recommend certain principles of action, such as courage, solidarity, love of equality, while explicitly they recommend the foundation of republican political systems upon agreements that recognise our sharing of the earth with one another. But Arendt did not believe that recommendations of this sort could be deduced from the nature of things, not even from the fact of human plurality. Her reminder of our plurality is, I think, more in the nature of an appeal:

Here we are, flung into the second half of the twentieth century, bereft of authorities to lay down rules for us, and in the shadow of death-camps and H-bombs. No-one can give us a logical demonstration that we all have human rights, but the camps and the bomb between them show us what can happen if we do *not* agree to share the earth with others. We have compelling reasons for trying to live together in peace, and our plurality and capacity for political action show us how this can be done. We

¹⁶⁸ *OR* 192–4 Cf. Honig, 'Declarations of Independence' 100–6.

¹⁶⁹ 'Remarks on "The Crisis Character of Modern Society"' 113; Cf. 'Truth and Politics' 247.

¹⁷⁰ 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 305, 310.

do not need to be saints to achieve this; we need not wait for a moral revolution, and our feelings and motives are best left hidden in the darkness of the human heart. All that is necessary is that we should be committed to *political* solutions to political problems: that we should be willing to make and keep agreements with one another, to establish lasting institutions to guard the rights we guarantee one another, and to devote ourselves as citizens to maintaining and improving the public world that lies between us.

6 A new republicanism

Roads to republicanism

Although the reflections prompted by Arendt's study of totalitarianism led her in many different directions, her thought trains have more than a common origin to hold them together. These various strands of thought are like loops, starting from the same point and meeting again after taking different paths, and the place at which they converge is occupied by Arendt's distinctive version of republicanism. We have now explored three different routes to this conclusion. In the first, reflecting upon totalitarianism, Marxism and the 'unnatural growth of the natural' in modern society, Arendt suggested that human beings are in danger of being swept away by the automatic forces that they themselves accelerate or let loose, and stand in urgent need of bulwarks against these forces, in the shape of a stable institutional world in which laws are not totalitarian laws of motion but secure fences inside which men can dwell.

Alongside this argument for the rebuilding of civilised politics in opposition to barbarism, we traced another strand of thinking, also set off by totalitarianism, about the human condition and the deficiencies of traditional political thought, and saw how Arendt insisted that, contrary to traditional assumptions, human beings are plural creatures who want to act and to disclose themselves, and need a political space of appearance in order to do it.

Taking yet another route, this time through reflections on morality and politics, we saw Arendt concluding that the answer to the horrors of totalitarianism is not to be found in personal morality, however exalted, but that only worldly institutions, built in the space between plural men and kept in being by their active consent, can rescue us from 'the darkness of the human heart'.

The point on which all these strands converge is Arendt's affirmation of the immense value of and urgent need for republican political institutions: 'republican' in a sense which is her own, but which is deeply indebted to the classical republican tradition of political thought. But why, it may be

asked,¹ did her reaction against totalitarianism lead her to such an esoteric solution? Why did it not lead her simply to affirm the value of Western liberal democracy? Part of the answer has to do with deficiencies that many contemporary critics have noticed in liberal democracy, and that are pungently summarised by Benjamin Barber: ‘Liberal Democracy is . . . a “thin” theory of democracy, one whose democratic values are prudential and thus provisional, optional and conditional – means to exclusively individualistic and private ends. From this precarious foundation, no firm theory of citizenship, participation, public goods, or civic virtue can be expected to arise.’² But Arendt’s unwillingness to put her trust in liberal democracy goes deeper than this. For whereas Barber and many others find it possible to take a highly critical view of existing democratic theories and practices while remaining optimistic about the possibilities of reform, Arendt’s criticisms were entwined with a much more deeply pessimistic outlook on the world of human affairs. Her whole view of politics was coloured by totalitarianism, and she had come to believe that the seeds of totalitarianism were deeply planted in modernity itself. Furthermore, her background and education as well as her political experience gave her a close affinity with the tragic sense of life characteristic of antiquity. It is therefore not surprising that the republicanism to which she turned should have been a version of *classical* republicanism.

This strand of thinking, which has attracted increasing academic interest in recent years,³ was out of fashion at the time when she was writing, and had always (in view of the overwhelming historical predominance of monarchical rule) been something of a minority tradition. Originating (with some Greek precedents) in Rome, it was passed down through the medieval city-states to Machiavelli and thence to Harrington, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Tocqueville as well as to political actors like the American Founding Fathers, the French Revolutionaries, and Arendt’s heroes Clemenceau and Rosa Luxemburg. Arendt liked to distinguish between political ‘philosophers’ and political ‘writers’ who ‘write out of political experiences and for the sake of politics’,⁴ and whereas the dominant tradition seemed to her to be a philosophers’ tradition (with all the distortions that entailed), the ‘writers’, most of whom were republicans, seemed to her to have more to teach us about politics.

We shall see in due course that Arendt’s version of republicanism is

¹ As George Kateb remarks, without representative democracy ‘there would be more of the things she dreads and fewer of the things she celebrates’ (G. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Oxford, Martin Robertson, 1984) 115).

² B. Barber, *Strong Democracy – Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984) 4.

³ e.g. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975).

⁴ ‘From Machiavelli to Marx’ (1965) MSS Box 39 023453.

significantly different from any of the models she inherited: she was, for example, much less interested than most of her predecessors both in military prowess and in the details of institutions, and much more interested in free discussion. It is nevertheless worthwhile to begin by stating some of the features of the tradition with which she had affinities. A 'republic' within the classical tradition was a state that is free in the sense that it is not subject to a master but is the common possession of its citizens, 'the public thing'. The notion of sovereignty, of absolute and final power, was therefore alien to the tradition, which cherished elaborate models of mixed and balanced political systems. Similarly, republics were 'governments of laws not men' in the double sense that all those in positions of power were subject to law and that laws were supposed to be applied impartially regardless of personal ties. Brutus, who sacrificed his natural loyalties to his public duty, is the archetypal republican hero.

Within the little world of the republic (and up to the foundation of the USA small size was often taken for granted) citizens enjoyed freedom from arbitrary power coupled with the dignity of taking joint responsibility for the *res publica*. Republican literature is full of exhortations about the importance of 'virtue', that is, public spirit, commitment to the common enterprise. This was essential not only to enable citizens to emulate Brutus and put the city before their kin, but also because republics were always visualised as living with their backs against the wall. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the republican tradition was heavy with the pathos of impending doom, deeply influenced by what seemed in the light of historical experience to be the evident fact that republican freedom is rare and desperately fragile. History showed that the normal political condition of mankind is either anarchy or despotism: these are the conditions to which all societies naturally tend. Occasionally, however, where circumstances are favourable, it is possible for heroic men to create a little haven of liberty and to preserve it for a time against inevitable decay. Such a free state runs against the grain of nature and history; it is threatened by kings from without and by corruption from within, and sooner or later it will succumb. When Rousseau asked, 'If Sparta and Rome perished, what state can hope to last for ever?'⁵ he merely stated a commonplace of the tradition.

To the classical republicans, therefore, political freedom was not something bestowed by nature or history. Like the physical space on which two of its celebrated examples were founded – Venice and Holland, both saved from the sea⁶ – it could be achieved only with great effort, by building and guarding strong bulwarks against the natural and historical forces that threatened to overwhelm it, and could be preserved only through single-

⁵ J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. M. Cranston (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968) 134.

⁶ On Holland, see S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (London, Collins, 1987) 25–50.

minded dedication and at great cost. That cost was stated most starkly by Machiavelli, who suggested that freedom was possible only where the citizens loved their artificial world not only above private gains and loyalties, but above their own souls. Republicanism in its classic form was therefore deeply imbued with a tragic sense of life and a heroic scale of values.

This tragic and heroic tone of republicanism was largely forgotten in the nineteenth century as a result of two phenomena which made political freedom seem easy and indeed inevitable. The first was the example of America, which seemed to show that freedom could be enjoyed on a large scale and without the heroic patriotism of an embattled city. The second, to which the American example contributed, was the nineteenth-century belief in inevitable progress, according to which the fate of political bodies is not determined by the actions and virtues of their citizens but by social and historical forces, which are (whether by direct or dialectical routes) leading all mankind to freedom. These two together created an assumption that sooner or later political freedom was going to be the norm rather than the exception; that it was going to be easy to achieve and maintain, demanding no heroic sacrifices, and that, since history was on the side of freedom, once won it would be permanent.

Arendt never shared these liberal assumptions,⁷ and her political views are better viewed against the backcloth of the classical republican tradition. It is easy to see the attractions of this heroic ideal for someone with her catastrophic experience and existentialist background. If one is doomed to die anyway, one can at least fight back and die with dignity;⁸ if one finds oneself thrown into the desert of the mid twentieth century, faced with overwhelming odds in the shape of Nazism, Stalinism, atomic weapons and social developments that seem to represent an 'unnatural growth of the natural', there is great comfort to be found in the message of the republican tradition that men can fight against the trend of the times and refuse to yield to the processes that threaten them. From her perspective, the most heartening event of the post-war world was a glorious *failure*, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The result is a kind of humanism quite different from the blithe, confident humanism of the Enlightenment: a grim humanism tempered by a tragic sense of the limits of the human condition.⁹

⁷ 'I never believed in liberalism', 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' in M.A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1979) 334.

⁸ 'Remarks to European Jewry' (no date, but just after World War II) MSS Box 68 paragraph 6.

⁹ On Arendt's affinities with Camus in this respect, see N. Jacobson, *Pride and Solace: The Functions and Limits of Political Theory* (New York and London, Methuen, 1986) 131; J.C. Isaac, 'Arendt, Camus, and Postmodern Politics', *Praxis International* 9/1-2 (April-July 1989) 48-71.

This kind of mood, and these reasons for being attracted by aspects of classical republicanism, were of course shared by many other Europeans in the first half of the twentieth century: there are obvious links here to the mood of the 'Front Generation' after the First World War. Some of these attitudes led intellectuals to fascism, with its rejection of liberalism, its restless activism, its 'heroic' values of leadership and the pursuit of glory, its idealisation of comradeship and Spartan self-sacrifice and its revival of ancient militarism. Existentialism plus classical republicanism could quite easily add up to fascism, as Arendt was well aware. But what she herself did with this heady mixture was to develop it in a quite different direction that is as far from fascism as it is from liberalism. The essential difference lies in the emphasis on human *plurality* which we have seen her developing in *The Human Condition* and which transforms both the existentialist and the classical elements in the mixture. Because we are plural, action in politics is not a matter of lonely heroes but of interaction between peers; because we are plural, even the most charismatic leader cannot do more than lead what is essentially a joint enterprise; because we are plural, human beings are at their most glorious not when their individuality is lost in Spartan comradeship on the battlefield, but when they are revealing their unique identities on the public stage.

This emphasis on the plurality of human beings and the political space between them is the most distinctive feature of Arendt's political thought. The uncompleted 'Introduction into Politics' which would have complemented *The Human Condition* was to have been concerned with 'the various modi of human plurality and the institutions which correspond to them'.¹⁰ Characteristically, however, instead of presenting this emphasis as an original insight, Arendt goes 'pearl-diving' in the deep waters of the past,¹¹ and comes up with what she claims are authentic experiences of human plurality that lie at the heart of Western politics where it has escaped distortion by the Platonic tradition. Before examining her rethinking of political concepts to take account of human plurality and political space, therefore, we shall look at her attempt to recover authentic political experiences. As she tried to do this in the 1950s she was greatly helped by meditations on Montesquieu. The account of 'Introduction into Politics' just cited announces in language that is a deliberate echo of *l'Esprit des lois* that she proposes to 'undertake a re-examination of the old question of forms of government, their principles and their modes of action'. We will understand her distinctive republicanism better if we follow some of these

¹⁰ 'Description of Proposal' (1959) Correspondence with the Rockefeller Foundation, MSS Box 20, 013872. See chapter 4 note 3 above.

¹¹ 'Walter Benjamin, 1892-1940' (1968) in *Men in Dark Times* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970) 205-6.

reflections, especially those that appear in the lectures on 'Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought' which she gave to the Christian Gauss Seminar at Princeton in 1953.

Plurality and political experiences

Montesquieu, who was not a philosopher and who had at any rate one foot in the republican tradition, seemed to Arendt to have managed to an unusual degree to escape from the preconceptions of the Platonic heritage. Reflecting upon and considerably elaborating hints in his work, she attributed to him a recovery of the fundamental experiences that lie at the root of politics, and which are, in the case of free politics, experiences not of ruling but of interacting with others.¹² Ever since Plato, philosophers had maintained that politics is primarily about ruling, though they added that good rulers, unlike bad ones, rule according to law. When Montesquieu came to think about law and the variety of political systems, however, he noticed (according to Arendt) that this traditional model is an oddly immobile one. Law sets *limits* to action; but what is it that actually sets action going, and leads it to take different directions in different kinds of polities? Montesquieu postulated three different animating principles, virtue, honour and fear, and Arendt maintains that in doing so he pointed to the fundamental experiences of human plurality that underlie politics.

The experience of plurality is an experience both of equality and of distinction; we are all human, and we are all separate individuals. As a result there are two different political styles through which we can celebrate our plurality, one of which – republican 'virtue' in Montesquieu's terms – maximises equality, whereas the other – Montesquieu's 'honour' – maximises opportunities for distinction.¹³ Yet another aspect of plurality, anti-political but perfectly authentic, appears in the 'fear' on which, according to Montesquieu, tyranny is based. For when any individual finds himself alone and powerless, in some situation with which action in concert cannot cope, human plurality becomes a threat and 'one single human being is confronted with the overwhelming majority of all others'.¹⁴

Having contrived to discover aspects of human plurality behind Montesquieu's classification of the animating principles of political bodies, Arendt then claims that similar experiences, with a little variation, can also be found lurking behind the traditional philosophical classification of

¹² 'Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought' (2nd draft, 1953) MSS Box 64, sections III and IV.

¹³ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) III 33–4. For further qualifications and complexities, see 'Lectures on the History of Political Theory' (1955) MSS Boxes 40–1, 024187–193.

¹⁴ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) IV 2.

forms of government according to the number of rulers: rule by one, by a few or by many. For although the ancient philosophers were determined to impose the category of *rule* on politics, this only worked in the cases that were really, as Aristotle admitted, perversions of politics, namely tyranny, oligarchy and democracy. Aristotle's pure forms of government, kingship, aristocracy and polity are not really cases of *rulership* at all, but different ways in which people can express their plurality in politics, corresponding to different fundamental experiences of that plurality. Thus, 'kingship', as opposed to tyranny, means leadership in a great enterprise like the Trojan War: it is an exceptional affair and corresponds to the human capacity for action in the sense of beginning (as we saw when considering 'action' earlier). 'Aristocracy', as opposed to oligarchy, does not mean rule by a class of rich men, but a political arena on the model of Athens in which all citizens continually strive to distinguish themselves among their peers, rather like the noblemen in Montesquieu's version of monarchy whose prime concern is their 'honour'. 'Polity', as opposed to democracy, does not mean rule by the many, but rather something more like Montesquieu's 'republic' inspired by 'virtue': a political body, exemplified best by Rome, based on 'the great overflowing joy of companionship among one's equals'.¹⁵ Whereas authentic kingship is a temporary affair without permanent institutions, aristocracy and polity require a framework of laws to hedge in and set bounds to the activities of the citizens.

What the philosophical tradition called 'forms of government', therefore, are not really forms of *rulership* at all, but three 'different, but not mutually exclusive ways of living together'. The three can be combined, as in the republican tradition of the 'mixed government', which 'means no more than the combination or integration of three fundamental traits which characterise men in so far as they live with each other and exist in plurality – the combination of "love of equality" . . . with "love for distinction" both integrated in the "royal" faculty of action, the experience that action is beginning and that nobody can act when he is alone'.¹⁶

Upon these ancient and fundamental experiences of a politics based on plurality, not on rule, philosophers from Plato onwards imposed notions of rulership that were, according to Arendt, derived from non-political sources and destructive of authentic politics. Her own political thought is conceived as an attempt to salvage and articulate ancient republican experiences by rethinking the traditional concepts in a way that takes account of human plurality and recognises politics as something that happens in the space *between* plural men.

This rethinking builds upon the analysis of human capacities in *The*

¹⁵ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) III 46.

¹⁶ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) III 45–6.

Human Condition, where she had contrasted the actions of plural men with two non-political activities, labour and work, and in considering her version of republicanism we should remember this dual contrast. For although a free republic in Arendt's sense does not arise out of the natural, biological side of human life summed up in the category of 'labour', it should not be thought of without qualification as something 'made' by the activity of 'work'. This is important, because many republican thinkers, such as Harrington, had indeed thought of free politics as something to be constructed according to a uniform design.¹⁷ Arendt would strongly agree that a republic does need a constitutional structure of laws and institutions, but these are not the focus of her attention. She wishes above all to correct the misleading emphasis of traditional thinking, and to stress that free politics is not only something that is artificial rather than natural, but also something that is not *made* by an artificer but that appears among plural men.

The focus of her attention, therefore, is what happens in the space *between* plural individuals. Although her terminology is new, she believed (rightly or wrongly) that the experiences she was trying to articulate were very old. Republicans always had opposed the idea that power belonged to a ruler, and always had talked about politics as 'the public thing' that belonged to all citizens, and Arendt tries to articulate this in terms of the public space that lies between plural men, and what goes on within that public space. Let us now see what happens when she rethinks the concepts of 'power', 'freedom', 'consent' and 'authority' from this point of view.

Plurality and political concepts: power

In *Totalitarianism* Arendt had written about power in fairly conventional terms, associating it with violence and treating Hobbes (who was preoccupied with the private interests of isolated individuals) as the classic philosopher of power.¹⁸ It seems to have been in the early 1950s, in the course of her meditations on Montesquieu, that the fundamental claim of her mature writings on the subject emerged: that power is not something an individual can possess on his own, nor even the sum total of the combined strengths of individuals. Instead it is something that 'springs up in between men' when they act together.¹⁹ Human beings acting 'in concert' discover among themselves a potency quite disproportionate to their individual resources.

¹⁷ *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973) 207. This edition is referred to below as *OR*.

¹⁸ *The Burden of Our Time* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1951) 136–9. This edition is referred to below as *OTI*.

¹⁹ 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS, c. 1952–3) MSS Box 69, 20a.

Arendt is at pains to distinguish power from violence and even to claim that the two are opposites. Although, as she agrees, they are in practice very often combined, their specific qualities can be seen to be quite different when pure cases do occur.²⁰ A single machine-gunner dominating a crowd of people shows that violence relies on weapons rather than on plurality. Power, on the other hand, can be seen at its clearest in cases of informal and non-violent action such as Gandhi's movement in India,²¹ or the Danes' non-violent resistance to the Final Solution during the Nazi occupation, a story which, Arendt thought, 'should be required reading in all political science courses which deal with the relations between power and violence'.²² The rise of Solidarity in Poland, which occurred after her death, is a textbook example of the phenomenon she was talking about, in which great power is generated apparently out of nothing by the non-violent coming together of previously helpless individuals.

Where pure cases of informal, non-violent power are concerned it is easy both to see what Arendt means and to appreciate the virtues of her analysis. Precisely how her theory applies to more conventional cases of 'political power' is a little less clear, since she agrees that government has normally involved power *and* violence (and authority, to which we shall return later). Generally speaking, her claim is that 'government is essentially organised and institutionalised power'²³ During the American Revolution, for example, the common action of people all over the colonies gave rise at the grass-roots to power which was then maintained and preserved by the network of agreements that culminated in the Federal Constitution.²⁴ This means that instead of seeing the Constitution as a device for putting limits on rulers who somehow possessed power of their own, the point of the Constitution was to organise, stabilise and preserve the power of the people by associating and balancing the various bodies in which it was gathered. According to Arendt both the Founding Fathers and their guide, Montesquieu, understood that the checks and balances of a federal system produce a body politic with *more* power than a system less complex and articulated could have.²⁵

One very important implication of Arendt's analysis is that in so far as rulers can exercise power they do so only by drawing on popular support, on the willingness of their subjects to go on acting together to maintain the body politic. 'All political institutions are manifestations and materialis-

²⁰ 'On Violence' (1970) in *Crises of the Republic* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972) 145, 155. ²¹ 'On Violence', 152.

²² 'Sonning Prize Speech' (1975) MSS Box 70, 013982. See also *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, Faber and Faber, 1963) 154.

²³ 'On Violence' 150. ²⁴ *OR* 175-6.

²⁵ *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958) 201. This edition is referred to below as *HC*.

ations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them.’²⁶ She frequently maintains that although violence can destroy power by isolating people and preventing them from acting together, it cannot provide a substitute, with the result that tyranny generates impotence.²⁷ As a corrective to the conventional view that government is a matter of command and legitimate coercion, this is no doubt healthy, but it comes rather oddly from a student of totalitarian regimes that had made such massive and successful use of coercion. And in fact Arendt does qualify her claim. She agrees, for example, that since power and violence are usually combined in government, the active support of one group of people – perhaps only of the secret police – can enable a government to rule the others by violence.²⁸ She recognises, indeed, that it was the popular power generated by the free association of citizens in the ancient Greek polis that enabled the masters to coerce their slaves and to engage in wars of annihilation with other cities.²⁹ It is in no way part of her doctrine that authentic power can only be used for laudable purposes. She claims, nevertheless, that as governmental violence increases, power decreases, and that the ultimate climax of totalitarianism, when the population is completely atomised and terror let loose even against the dictator’s own henchmen, can lead only to paralysis and impotence.³⁰

Arendt’s insistence on distinguishing conceptually between power and violence is particularly striking in the context of the republican tradition, for (although Arendt does not herself emphasise the point) this had been overwhelmingly a militaristic tradition, cherishing the memory of Romans and Spartans who were free *because* of their military prowess, and whose patriotism and public spirit had been the *esprit de corps* of comrades in arms.³¹ In her essay ‘On Violence’ she does discuss the phenomenon of solidarity on the battlefield, but she does not see this (as Rousseau had done) as a model for citizenship. She suggests that in such experiences of self-sacrifice for comrades, what comes to the fore is not political union so much as biological species-being, the sense ‘that our own death is accompanied by the potential immortality of the group we belong to’.³² As we shall see later, her own understanding of citizenship is very far from this kind of elemental brotherhood, and relies, like the rest of her republican thinking, on the concepts of human plurality and space between people.

²⁶ ‘On Violence’ 140. ²⁷ HC 202. ²⁸ ‘On Violence’, 149.

²⁹ ‘On Violence’ 149; ‘Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik’ (c. 1957) MSS Box 60, 7.

³⁰ ‘On Violence’ 154.

³¹ L. Botstein in ‘Liberating the Pariah: Politics, the Jews, and Hannah Arendt’, *Salmagundi* 60 (Spring–Summer 1983) 95, points out that Arendt was able to draw on the non-violent Jewish tradition.

³² ‘On Violence’ 165; Cf. Arendt in A. Klein (ed.), *Dissent, Power, and Confrontation* (New York, McGraw Hill, 1971) 102.

One implication of her analysis that is more obviously in line with earlier republican traditions is her repudiation of the idea of ‘sovereignty’³³ – the idea, so very influential within Western political thinking since the seventeenth century, that somewhere in any political body there must be an ultimate authority that has the last word. Sovereignty, most fully articulated by Hobbes, was democratised by Rousseau and transferred in the course of the French Revolution from the King to the nation.³⁴ But those political thinkers and actors who understood power as the fruit of cooperation rather than of command, like Montesquieu and the Founding Fathers, would have no truck with sovereignty. Following their example, Arendt is at pains to distinguish between the illusion of omnipotence in the hands of a single sovereign and the genuine power that human beings can generate by acting together.

In so far as sovereign power does have any reality in politics, she claims, it arises from common action and mutual trust. Where a body of people are bound together by the bonds of mutual promises, their power can be very great, to the extent that they are able not only to exercise power here and now but to have some control over what happens in the future. This is not something that any individual man can have in the world of human affairs: mastery is available to him only in dealing with non-human material. But ‘if sovereignty is in the realm of action and human affairs what mastership is in the realm of making and the world of things’, then the difference between them is that whereas the worker can control his material only if he is alone with it, away from the interference of others, control over human affairs is available, if at all, only to ‘the many bound together’.³⁵

Freedom

Just as (in Arendt’s rethinking of political concepts) power is something that comes into being between plural men, and is nothing to do with an imagined ‘sovereignty’ belonging to a single ruler, so freedom also is understood not as self-determination but as something that appears in the interactions of plural beings. In order to explain what she meant by freedom in politics, Arendt had to distinguish it from a number of other phenomena with which, she thought, it had often been confused.

To begin with, freedom is not the same thing as ‘liberation’.³⁶ A man who is subject to the rule of a master is clearly not free, and neither is a person who is subject to that most exacting of despots, dire poverty. Liberation

³³ ‘Freedom and Politics’ in A. Hunold (ed.), *Freedom and Serfdom* (Dordrecht, Reidel, 1961) 204. ³⁴ *OR* 156. ³⁵ *HC* 245.

³⁶ ‘What is Freedom?’, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Viking Press, 1968) 148; *OR* 29.

from the constraints of bodily necessity and of other men is therefore an essential precondition for freedom, but only the first step on the road: freedom itself is something else again.³⁷ Neither should political freedom be confused with civil liberty, the rights, to such blessings as religious liberty or a fair trial, which form protective fences around the private lives of citizens.³⁸ Civil liberty is essentially a private affair, whereas political freedom, which Arendt regards as being the most authentic kind, is essentially public, a matter of participation in public affairs.

Up to this point, a reader accustomed to the ordinary distinctions of political thought finds no difficulty with Arendt's concepts; we seem to be on familiar territory, looking at yet another version of the classic contrast between 'negative' and 'positive' freedom. But we need to beware of identifying Arendt's 'political freedom' with 'positive liberty' as understood within the Rousseauian tradition, according to which we are free when we rule ourselves by our general will. For the trouble with this way of thinking, as Arendt saw it, is that it is essentially unpolitical: it does not take account of human plurality. Just as the idea of sovereignty is out of place in politics because it implies a single omnipotent ruler and is incompatible with the plurality of real political power, so the idea of self-determination by a 'general will' also dodges the realities of political plurality.³⁹ Arendt's understanding of freedom is therefore no more at home within the familiar tradition of 'positive liberty' than within 'negative' liberalism.

In a sense, of course, the tradition to which she does consciously belong is the classical republican tradition, for which freedom always had been something public, possessed and enjoyed by citizens who looked after their own *res publica*. But although she presents her enquiry as a matter of recovering and articulating experiences from the past,⁴⁰ her understanding of freedom has a distinctively modern element, the existentialist or Kantian preoccupation with human spontaneity.⁴¹ One way of describing her distinctive approach to the idea of freedom might indeed be to say that she was trying to graft the existentialist sense of the open future that always lies before each individual on to classical republican images of citizens standing shoulder to shoulder in defence of their common freedom. But she would

³⁷ Arendt thought that the gap between the two was symbolised in the Exodus and the *Aeneid*, both of which describe wanderings which take place between an escape and a new foundation (*OR* 205).

³⁸ *OR* 133–4, 218. Arendt was, however, prepared to insist on the importance of such rights when faced with left-wing dismissals of 'bourgeois freedom'. See 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution', *Crises of the Republic* 221.

³⁹ *OR* 76–7; 'What is Freedom?' 163–4.

⁴⁰ 'What is Freedom?' 148, 154, 166.

⁴¹ On the Kantian roots of Arendt's thinking, see R. Beiner, 'Action, Natality and Citizenship: Hannah Arendt's Concept of Freedom' in Z. Pelczynski and J. Gray (ed.), *Conceptions of Liberty in Political Philosophy* (London, Athlone Press, 1984) 349–75.

probably have objected that such a formulation merely reiterates the opposition between solitary individuals and solid collectives that she was trying to overcome by articulating a concept that takes account of the space *between* people. Her writings on freedom are more than ordinarily obscure, partly, perhaps, because their subject is very closely linked with her concept of 'action', with which, as we saw in the chapter on *The Human Condition*, she wrestled over some considerable time. Our best clue to understanding her meaning, however, is to keep in mind her preoccupation with human plurality.

We have seen that when she thought about *power*, Arendt distinguished between the strength that an individual may possess on his own and the actual power that can be generated and exercised only when human beings act together out in the world. At the heart of her thinking about freedom is a similar distinction between a capacity we possess as individuals and the full reality of freedom as a 'tangible, worldly reality'⁴² amongst us. The *germ* of freedom, the root from which it grows, is a faculty possessed by all human beings, 'the sheer capacity to begin' which lies behind all enterprise and creation. But this sheer human spontaneity, this 'ability to initiate' which belongs to 'man as an individual', is pre-political.⁴³ It becomes freedom in the full sense of the word only when it generates a 'mundane reality' that can actually be seen by all, and politics is, for Arendt, 'the place where freedom can manifest itself and become a reality'.⁴⁴

If individual spontaneity is at the root of freedom, why is there any need for that freedom to find embodiment in politics? Arendt's answer is to point to the human condition of plurality, which means that when an individual wants to *do* something, he needs the cooperation of others. Political freedom is 'a quality of the I-can and not of the I-will'.⁴⁵ It involves actually doing things, exercising 'the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before',⁴⁶ and that means cooperating with others, generating with them the power that carries the enterprise through (which is why Arendt was so much concerned to distinguish power from mere repressive violence). When we are engaged in an enterprise of this kind, our individual capacities for spontaneity are consummated in a 'state of being free'⁴⁷ that is fully manifest.

It may help us to see what she is getting at if we think of a voluntary organisation such as Amnesty International. At the root of any such organisation lies the capacity that belongs to all individuals for starting

⁴² OR 124.

⁴³ 'What is Freedom?' 169; 'Freedom and Politics' 214; 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' 09.

⁴⁴ 'Freedom and Politics' 192, 198.

⁴⁵ *The Life of the Mind*, (London, Secker and Warburg, 1978), referred to below as *L of M*, vol. II, 'Willing' 200.

⁴⁶ 'What is Freedom?' 151. ⁴⁷ 'Freedom and Politics' 215.

something that had never existed before: but the acting in concert that called something new into existence in the world is what enables us actually to *see* freedom, as Arendt said, as a worldly reality. Her own paradigm of freedom made visible is of course *revolution*; the failed Hungarian Revolution in her own time, the successful American Revolution two centuries earlier. For revolution was 'a new experience which revealed man's capacity for novelty',⁴⁸ demonstrating the human capacity both to break with the past and its chain of predictable consequences and, by acting with others, to make a new beginning in the world.

This stress on spontaneity and calling the new into existence is crucial and distinctive to Arendt's version of republican freedom. Most theorists who are critical of liberal individualism and who want to understand freedom in public rather than private terms tend to think of it as participation in collective decision-making: taking decisions, that is, on an agenda that is somehow already set. The point about Arendt's concept of freedom, by contrast, is her stress on our capacity not just to choose between prescribed alternatives but, with the help of our fellows, to call entirely new possibilities into existence. She stresses the 'miraculous' quality of human freedom,⁴⁹ our ability to interrupt predictable chains of events and to do things that are utterly unexpected. And since this kind of newness cannot last, since actions themselves set off automatic processes and human affairs continually petrify into administration, freedom as a worldly condition persists only where 'new beginnings are constantly injected into the stream of things already initiated'.⁵⁰ This 'state of being free' is, Arendt agrees, very rare, whereas the sheer spontaneity from which it springs is a gift that all human beings possess, and that only totalitarianism could possibly destroy. Nevertheless, she believed that only in this rare condition of cooperative dynamism could freedom achieve 'its true and proper stature as a reality in world affairs'.⁵¹

Arendt's vision of freedom as a condition in which people are continually joining together in dynamic association inevitably recalls Tocqueville's picture of American democracy. Tocqueville (who belonged with Montesquieu to the political writers Arendt most admired) had described the hectic activity of nineteenth century American citizens, who seemed to be

⁴⁸ OR 34.

⁴⁹ 'What is Freedom?' 168. Even Benjamin Barber, whose account of 'strong democracy' has many affinities with Arendt's thought, tends to underplay the role of *initiative* in politics in favour of *choice*: e.g. 'In the political arena, to speak about doing is to speak about choosing – about deliberating, determining and deciding' (*Strong Democracy* 126). But Cf. R. Battek, 'Spiritual Values, Independent Initiatives and Politics' in V. Havel *et al.* (ed. J. Keane), *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (London, Hutchinson, 1985) 104: 'Politics is not only the art of the possible, but as well ... the *creation* of the possible.'

⁵⁰ 'Freedom and Politics' 215.

⁵¹ 'Freedom and Politics' 216.

continually associating themselves in groups to further some cause or other.⁵² If we think of nineteenth-century America as an example of what Arendt meant by freedom, however, we find ourselves faced with a puzzle. If freedom means people translating creative imagination into worldly reality, acting together to bring new things into existence and to carry their enterprises through, then Tocqueville's America offers us examples not only in the world of politics but also, very strikingly, in that economic sphere which Arendt thought of as the realm of necessity. For who could better exemplify the spirit of enterprise than the settlers and entrepreneurs of that heroic age? Acting together with one's fellows to call into existence what had never before existed in human affairs was, one might say, the frontier spirit itself, exemplified in the business enterprises built up from nothing as much as in the new states founded and admitted to the Union. This line of thought leaves us wondering why Arendt paid so little attention to enterprise in the economic world, and so much to comparable phenomena in politics.⁵³

Part of the explanation must undoubtedly lie in the general lack of interest in economics which, as we saw earlier, vitiates Arendt's concept of 'society'. Nevertheless, her position should not be attributed simply to ignorance or prejudice. After all, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she had indeed discussed entrepreneurial activity – the activity of that prince of entrepreneurs, Cecil Rhodes, who said that 'expansion is everything'⁵⁴ and who pursued imperial conquest as a business undertaking. In that context, Arendt had claimed that imperialism was an economic enterprise rather than a truly political one precisely because it was concerned with an endless process of expansion rather than with the foundation and preservation of a stable body politic.

In other words, she wants to draw a distinction between economic enterprise and *political* action which hinges on concern with and respect for the stable common world of the republic, and in which the dynamism of free action is hedged about by the institutions of a shared public realm. Economic enterprise certainly manifests spontaneity and cooperative action and calls new things into existence in human affairs, so that the building up of General Motors might seem to make freedom a worldly reality just as much as, say, the Civil Rights movement did. But what is good for General Motors is not the same thing as what is good for the United States as a stable republic, and economic enterprise with its

⁵² A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. H. Reeve (London, Oxford University Press, 1946) ch. 11.

⁵³ If Arendt *had* applied her ideas about action, freedom, plurality and consent to economics, she might have come up with ideas similar to those expressed in Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York, Signet, 1957). ⁵⁴ OTI 124.

perpetual revolutionising of the means of production directly threatens the existence of any kind of worldly stability.⁵⁵ One of the implicit conditions for freedom in Arendt's sense is that human spontaneity and the great power generated by cooperation should be exercised within the bounds of what, quoting Melville, she calls 'lasting institutions':⁵⁶ within a public space guarded by constitutional arrangements upheld by the public commitments of citizens. The nature of those commitments is the concern of her reflections on consent, another political concept that acquires a special meaning in the context of her spatial view of politics as something that happens in between human beings.

Consent

In *On Revolution* and in her essay on 'Civil Disobedience' Arendt discusses the various versions of the notion that government rests upon some sort of covenant, and distinguishes between those that do and those that do not recognise the authentic plurality of political men. In the seventeenth century, according to her account, three different sorts of original contract were imagined, along with mixtures of the three. There was in the first place the unequal covenant, recorded in the Bible and reenacted by the Puritans, between a people and its God. Secondly, there was what Arendt calls the 'vertical version' of the social contract, in which each individual agrees with the sovereign to render obedience in return for protection of his private interests. Finally, there was the 'horizontal version' of the social contract, the only truly political agreement, which is an alliance between individuals in which they mutually bind themselves to form a society.⁵⁷ Whether or not she is justified in reading Hobbes' theory as a statement of the second version and Locke's of the third,⁵⁸ the important thing for Arendt is, as always, whether or not consent is understood in a way that takes account of the relations between plural persons. The distinction she is particularly interested in is that between 'the act of consent, accomplished by each individual person in his isolation', and 'the act of mutual promise', enacted, in the words of the American Declaration of Independence, 'in the presence of one another'.⁵⁹ For 'binding and promising, combining and covenanting' are 'the means by which power is kept in existence' and that form the basis of political bodies. She therefore credits the Pilgrim Fathers who formed the Mayflower Compact with the discovery of 'the grammar of

⁵⁵ HC 252–6. ⁵⁶ OR 84–6. ⁵⁷ 'Civil Disobedience', *Crises of the Republic* 85–7.

⁵⁸ Cf. J. Dunn, 'The Concept of "Trust" in the Politics of John Locke' in R. Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984) 279–301.

⁵⁹ OR 171.

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', both of which 'combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and the keeping of promises'.⁶⁰

Having discovered this kind of pluralistic consent at the basis of American institutions when she was writing *On Revolution*, Arendt drew on it again when she came to consider the issue of civil disobedience in connection with the Civil Rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations a decade later. She observed that lawyers, used to dealing with individual law-breakers, tended to understand civil disobedience as something analogous to this, or at best as a matter of conscientious objection by individuals following their private convictions. By contrast, Arendt interprets it as a phenomenon of political action by groups of publicly concerned citizens, and sets it in the context of a body politic specifically based upon continuing consent. Consent is, she claims, the 'spirit' of American constitutional law: not in the 'vertical' sense of individuals agreeing to be ruled, still less in the solipsistic Rousseauian sense of each person somehow being ruled by himself, but in the 'horizontal' sense of mutual agreement to the republican constitution, 'active support and continuing participation in all matters of public interest'.⁶¹

Anticipating the objection that this notion of consent is just as fictitious as its seventeenth-century precursors, she argues firstly that any human society implies *tacit* consent, in the sense that since none of us would have survived from infancy to maturity without being welcomed into a human community, surviving itself implies some tacit obligation to accept the society's rules. This 'tacit' consent is not necessarily 'voluntary', however, and it only becomes so in communities where dissent is a legal and practical possibility, as in the USA. 'Dissent implies consent, and is the hallmark of free government; one who knows that he may dissent knows also that he somehow consents when he does not dissent.'⁶² Arendt does not suggest that this implies consent to specific laws and policies, but only to the Constitution itself, within which all citizens share power. The consent on which a free government rests, therefore, is a kind of mutual obligation

⁶⁰ *OR* 175. If Arendt had been less prejudiced against capitalism, she might have noticed that joint stock companies are a striking instance of the creation of worldly entities by mutual contract, and one which contributed a great deal to the American political tradition.

⁶¹ 'Civil Disobedience' 85.

⁶² 'Civil Disobedience' 88. For an interesting discussion by another political theorist coming to contractual thinking (like Arendt) via meditations on repression, see Z. Rau, 'The State of Enslavement: The East European Substitute for the State of Nature', *Political Studies* 39/2 (June 1991) 253–69, especially 265.

holding together plural individuals who share responsibility for their common affairs. The forming of voluntary associations to influence those affairs, and even the practice of civil disobedience, are part and parcel of that shared responsibility.

Although this connection between consent, power and responsibility seemed to Arendt to be particularly close in a republic like the USA, it did not seem to her to be entirely absent from less satisfactory political systems. Having observed at first hand the 'unpolitical' Germans who had felt that what the Nazi regime did was none of their business, she was very much concerned to stress that we cannot avoid responsibility for the actions of the political community of which we are members.⁶³ Even subjects of a tyranny cannot easily escape this responsibility. As we have seen, her understanding of power implies that the power a regime exercises is lent to it by the actions of its subjects, particularly by their willingness to carry out orders. Delivering her own judgement on Eichmann, the perfect bureaucrat who had done nothing except obey orders, she declared that 'politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same'.⁶⁴ In extreme cases of tyranny, she agreed, an individual may find himself so totally helpless that his responsibility for the public world lapses, but she was concerned to insist that lack of political freedom did not automatically absolve people from political responsibility.⁶⁵

Mutual consent seemed to Arendt to lie at the heart of political power. But what of *authority*, which, as she remarked, should not be identified with power any more than should violence? The problem of finding a foundation for political authority in a secularised and post-totalitarian world was one to which she devoted a great deal of thought over many years.

Authority

At the beginning of an essay entitled 'What is Authority?', Arendt remarked that it might have been wiser to cast her enquiry into the past tense. So totally had genuine authority vanished from the modern world that the term itself had ceased to be understood.⁶⁶ What are now called 'authoritarian' regimes, for instance, usually rest upon violence, whereas a

⁶³ 'Collective Responsibility' (1968) in J.W. Bernauer SJ (ed.), *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Boston/Dordrecht/Lancaster, Martinus Nijhoff, 1987) 50. Cf. R.H. Feldman's 'Introduction' to *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, ed. Feldman (New York, Grove Press, 1978) 33.

⁶⁴ *Eichmann in Jerusalem* 255. Compare Vaclav Havel's analysis of the way in which the communist systems of Eastern Europe were sustained by the complicity of those who played along with the ideological fictions of the regime (Havel, *Power of the Powerless*, 23–96).

⁶⁵ 'Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship', *The Listener* (6 August 1964) 185–205.

⁶⁶ 'What is Authority?', *Between Past and Future* 91.

genuinely authoritarian government would be obeyed by reason neither of force nor persuasion, but because it stood at the head of a hierarchic order. Authority in this sense (exemplified, for instance, by the position of the Pope within the Roman Catholic Church) had been understood within the Western tradition as something that transcended politics and bestowed legitimacy on it from outside, and it seemed to have disappeared from politics with the advance of secularisation and the decline in traditional religion. Arendt's reflections upon it are concerned not only to investigate its nature and origins, but also, by tracing it to political roots concealed by the tradition itself, to further her project of rethinking political thought to take account of human plurality.

Her first point is that the particular kind of relationship and institution that centuries of Western tradition knew as 'authority' is not by any means a universal human phenomenon, but was something that came into being in a particular time and place, in ancient Rome. The Greeks, she claims, had no notion of it. They were familiar with the relations between free citizens in the polis, with the despotic rule of a master over his slaves and with the violence of tyrants, but not with authority, which 'implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom'.⁶⁷ Such a concept of legitimate rulership was, she claims, something that Plato and Aristotle were feeling their way towards, but for which there was no model in Greek experience. The source of authority – word, concept and fundamental experience – was not Greek but Roman, and is to be found in the piety with which the Romans regarded the sacred foundation of their city. Authority, *auctoritas*, derives (according to Arendt) from the verb *augere*, to augment, and those who had authority were the Senate, who were tied back by tradition to the original founding of Rome, and had the obligation to augment and hand on their inheritance. The 'Roman trinity'⁶⁸ of tradition, religion and authority tied all Romans to a sacred past, but this tradition-based authority possessed by the Senate was explicitly distinguished from the power possessed by the people.

According to Arendt, therefore, authority was in its origins a political phenomenon derived from a specific political act, the founding of Rome. In the process of its incorporation into the Western tradition of political thinking, however, it underwent some strange transformations, which started when the Romans, with their reverence for ancestors of all descriptions, adopted the Greek philosophers as their authorities in matters of intellect. Plato and Aristotle thereby acquired a sacred standing that they would never have been accorded by the sceptical Greeks, and Plato's notion of an unseen measure by which earthly things should be judged became part

⁶⁷ 'What is Authority?' 106.

⁶⁸ 'What is Authority?' 125.

of the notion of authority. Then, by an even more remarkable transfiguration, the Roman spirit was grafted on to Christianity, turning a spiritual movement which had been radically anti-political and anti-institutional into the Catholic Church, in which the Roman concepts of religion, tradition and authority found their most complete development. The net effect of these changes was to turn authority into something it had never been for the Romans, namely, something that *transcended* politics and bestowed legitimacy on it from outside. For the institution that inherited and passed on authority was the Church rather than the body politic, while the combination of Christian theology and Platonic philosophy overlaid and obscured authority's political origins. Instead, authority was thought of as being rooted in a transcendent source, whether that source was Plato's ideal measures or the commandments of the Christian God.⁶⁹ As Arendt sees it, the trouble with both these sources of authority was that they were outside politics and tried 'to impose *something absolute* on a realm where everything is relative because it consists of relationships'.⁷⁰

Within the Western tradition, therefore, what was handed down was an understanding of authority as something bestowed upon political bodies from outside the realm of politics itself. Arendt notes in *On Revolution* that the American Founding Fathers were very much concerned to anchor their new republican institutions to external authorities of this kind, whether to the quasi-Platonic 'self-evident truths' of the Declaration of Independence or to the religious belief in a Divine Legislator with his supernatural sanctions of heaven and hell. In either case, it seemed obvious to them that their positive laws needed the backing of some higher law in order to be legitimate.⁷¹

Arendt's own rethinking of political concepts in terms of political plurality is directed against this kind of foundationalism. One of her strategies is to go back beyond the Platonist and Christian transformation of Roman traditions, and to point out that in practice neither the Greeks nor the Romans had felt the need of a source outside politics to legitimise their laws. Greek and Roman understandings of law were very different, but both of them were concerned with relations between people rather than with some transcendent source of authority. *Nomos* in Greek meant something man-made rather than natural, and referred to the boundaries that hedge in and limit human activities, thereby providing some stability amid the endless flux of human affairs.⁷² The Roman *lex*, while quite

⁶⁹ 'What is Authority?' 120–8.

⁷⁰ 'Breakdown of Authority' (1953) MSS Box 68, paragraph III (the emphasis is Arendt's).

⁷¹ OR 182–94.

⁷² OR 186; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) III 26; 'Ideology and Terror', *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 3rd edition (London, Allen and Unwin, 1967) 465.

different, is equally mundane and spatial, having originally meant a relationship, an agreement or alliance between different parties. Within the Western tradition, only Montesquieu had understood and revived this Roman conception by describing laws as 'rapports'.⁷³

As Arendt agreed, each of these ancient conceptions of law had its own strengths and weaknesses,⁷⁴ but what both had in common was an understanding of laws as purely human institutions that did not need the backing of divine commands or natural reason to be legitimate. She admitted that there were traces even in pre-Platonic Greek thought of the notion of a cosmic law inherent in nature, an idea which appealed to philosophers, and which became one of the ancestors of the Western notion of natural law. She argued, however, that a law which is supposed to be inherent in the whole of nature is no use for the purposes for which we need laws, namely to establish relationships and boundaries between human beings. The disadvantages of the idea of natural law seemed to her to have become finally apparent in totalitarianism, where terror was used in obedience to what were supposed to be natural laws of conflict and destruction.⁷⁵ Another strand in Western thinking about universal law which seemed to her much healthier (because it was much more political) was the Roman jurists' notion of the *ius gentium*, a body of law built up in the course of relations between different cities with different rules.⁷⁶ In other words, whereas natural law implies an order outside and above politics, international law is something built up by agreement in the space between people that is the realm of politics.

Western traditions of political thinking have conditioned us to think of laws as commands proceeding from a sovereign authority, whereas Arendt urges us to think of them as features of the political space between human beings.⁷⁷ Once laws *are* seen in these spatial terms, as they were by Montesquieu, the philosophical problem of finding an absolute source of authority, a 'higher' law, disappears, to be replaced by the practical political problem of engendering consent.⁷⁸ Like international conventions, laws derive their authority simply from the public commitments that give rise to them. As far as the authority of law is concerned, therefore, Arendt maintains that there is in principle a remedy ready to hand for the loss of authority in the traditional sense, namely the political plurality of human beings.

The authority rapidly acquired by the American Constitution arose, she suggests, from the act of foundation, whereby men already gathered in

⁷³ OR 188. ⁷⁴ 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' 21–8.

⁷⁵ 'Ideology and Terror' 461–5.

⁷⁶ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' III 26–31.

⁷⁷ 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' 28. ⁷⁸ OR 188.

bodies constituted by mutual consent came together and agreed to establish a new political institution. Institutions arise in the space between men, and carry their own authority with them when human beings agree to establish them.⁷⁹ Although, as she admits, the Founding Fathers themselves were not clearly aware of this, believing that they needed transcendent sources of authority to back up the institutions they were creating,⁸⁰ they did think of themselves *as* founders, as if they were sufficiently in tune with the Roman spirit to realise 'that it would be the act of foundation itself, rather than an Immortal Legislator or self-evident truth or any other transcendent, transmundane source, which eventually would become the foundation of authority in the new body politic'. Reverent awe at the act of beginning itself, the tremendous event of a people exercising freedom in the founding of a new body politic, conferred upon the constitution its almost sacred status. Arendt might have quoted Faust: 'In the beginning was the Deed',⁸¹ had she not wanted to avoid the individualistic mood of existentialism, and to stress that great deeds in politics are not the achievement of solitary heroes but of plural men acting 'in concert'. All the same, the existentialist flavour of this stress on the human freedom to make new beginnings does draw attention to the problem she set herself in trying to anchor a distinctively modern humanism in what purports to be a recovery of authentic historical experience. In reflecting on this problem, as we shall see, she draws silently on existentialist ideas about inauthenticity.

The idea that human beings are not dependent on transcendent authority, that they can and must create their own laws and institutions, building a human world in the desert that lies between them,⁸² is comforting but at the same time unnerving because it emphasises human freedom and responsibility. Like many other existentialist thinkers who have drawn attention to the ways in which human beings attempt to avoid recognising their freedom, Arendt observes that even those most directly involved in these momentous world-building activities have done their best to avoid looking down into 'the abyss of freedom' as they passed over it.⁸³ There may have been good political reasons for this, for the trouble is that 'it is in the very nature of a beginning to carry with itself a measure of complete arbitrariness'.⁸⁴ Furthermore, and particularly if this beginning is understood in terms of the *fabrication* of a new state, the arbitrariness involved may include appalling potentialities for crime and violence.⁸⁵ At any rate,

⁷⁹ 'Authority' (1953) MSS Box 56, 7. Cf. the interesting discussion by B. Honig, 'Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic', *American Political Science Review* 85/1 (March 1991) 97–113. ⁸⁰ OR 185.

⁸¹ Goethe, *Faust* Part I, trans. P. Wayne (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1949) 71.

⁸² 'Lectures on the History of Political Theory' 1955 024092.

⁸³ *L of M* II 195. Cf. J.G. Gray, 'The Abyss of Freedom – and Hannah Arendt' in Hill, *Hannah Arendt* 230. ⁸⁴ OR 206.

⁸⁵ OR 208.

when the Founding Fathers looked back to the Romans for lessons in establishing a new body politic, what they found was that the Romans themselves had dodged the problems of beginning and sidestepped the fratricidal violence of Romulus by understanding their own foundation as a *restoration* of Troy. In other words, their own experience of beginning something new in politics was concealed rather than articulated.⁸⁶

Arendt reflected at length upon the awkward fact that the very same men who had known most at first hand about the potentialities of political action had been unwilling to acknowledge innovation when they saw it. Besides the Roman myth of the restoration of Troy, most fully stated in Virgil's *Aeneid*, she found a similar preference for restoration over beginning in the same poet's Fourth Eclogue, in which the birth of a child is celebrated with a meditation on *rebirth*.⁸⁷ In her last thoughts on this subject, in *The Life of the Mind*, she remarked on the pervasiveness in Roman thinking not only of a cyclic understanding of politics as rebirth but also of the idea of a Golden Age, the 'realm of Saturn', in which no political action happens at all. The resurrection of this Golden Age in Marx's vision of communist society was yet another confirmation of how reluctant men have been to recognise and articulate their capacity for political action.⁸⁸

Arendt's claims about the capacity of human beings to act together in politics and establish a stable world between them therefore go along with the admission that this capacity has never been fully conceptualised, not even by men like the Romans and the Founding Fathers who had most practical experience of it. At most, all they had was the occasional intimation of their own freedom. One such intimation Arendt finds in the Roman interest not just in *rebirth* but in *birth* itself, particularly Augustine's saying, 'that there be a beginning, man was created'. Another she detects in the Founding Fathers' amendment of the phrase from Virgil, which they changed to '*novus ordo saeculorum*', implicitly recognising that they really were making a new beginning.⁸⁹

What Arendt feels it necessary to articulate on their behalf, however, is the idea that the human capacity for starting anew need not be damned by the arbitrariness inherent in beginning, nor need acting to found a new body politic be confused with fabrication and its attendant violence. When men begin to act, their action displays the principle that animates it, and the principle that was manifested in the American Revolution was the principle of 'mutual promise and common deliberation'.⁹⁰ By acting together, Arendt is saying, plural human beings can on occasion establish both power and authority, giving rise to a public world in which they can be at home and exercise their freedom as citizens.⁹¹

⁸⁶ *L of M* II 216. ⁸⁷ *OR* 210. ⁸⁸ *L of M* II 212–16. ⁸⁹ *OR* 212. ⁹⁰ *OR* 214.

⁹¹ On the topics of this section, Cf. R. Burns, 'Hannah Arendt's Constitutional Thought' in Bernauer, *Amor Mundi*.

Citizenship and public space

The idea that citizenship confers a special dignity and imposes special duties is one of the central themes of the classical republican tradition. Unlike a subject, a citizen is a participator in the *res publica*, sharing in common responsibility for public affairs. As such, he is expected to set the public interest above his own private concerns, even at the cost of profound personal sacrifice. The republican imagination was haunted for two thousand years by the awesome figure of Brutus, founding father of the Roman Republic, whose devotion to his political progeny was such that when his own sons plotted to reinstate the deposed king, he as magistrate personally ordered their execution. Brutus was continually invoked by French revolutionary orators, whose guide and inspiration, Rousseau, had been particularly fascinated by the personal costs of republican patriotism. Near the beginning of *Emile* Rousseau specifically distinguishes between living as an individual man and living as a citizen, stressing that the latter involves the submergence of individual and personal interests in the common life of the body politic. He tells the story of the Spartan mother who meets a messenger just back from the battle in which all her five sons were engaged. White-faced, she asks for news. All her sons are dead – but Sparta is victorious. Unflinching, she hurries to the temple to give thanks. ‘That’, says Rousseau, ‘was a citizen.’⁹²

Arendt’s understanding of citizenship is clearly related to this republican tradition, but with significant differences. Not only is there much less emphasis on fighting and dying for one’s country, but there is a new and all-pervasive emphasis on the plurality of the citizens and the space between them, as though the solid phalanx of the Spartans had opened out to make room in its midst for the Athenian agora or the Founding Fathers’ Congress. This is a conception of citizenship without the anti-individualist and quasi-totalitarian atmosphere that disturbs many readers of Rousseau, and that was revived in some aspects of fascism.⁹³ The key to Arendt’s combination of citizenship and individuality lies in her conception of public space.

Nevertheless, Arendt is as uncompromising as her republican predecessors in insisting on the duties of citizenship, for the catastrophes of her own time seemed to her to be at least partly traceable to lack of public spirit.⁹⁴ Citizens of a republic ought to be conscious of their obligation to

⁹² J.J. Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. B. Foxley (London, Dent, 1911) 8.

⁹³ Cf. P. Springborg, ‘Arendt, Republicanism and Patriarchalism’, *History of Political Thought* 10/3 (Autumn 1989) 514; J.G.A. Pocock, ‘The Political Limits to Premodern Economics’ in J. Dunn (ed.), *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) 132–6.

⁹⁴ ‘The general history of Europe, from the French Revolution to the beginning of World War I, may be described in its most tragic aspect as the slow but steady transformation of the

look after and pass on the public world that they inherit, and when necessary to place its interests above those they have as private persons, for it is not to be expected that this conflict of priorities can be avoided. Attempts to evade it by suggesting that the public interest is equivalent to one's enlightened self-interest seemed to Arendt to miss the point, which is that the public world that lies between us has interests of its own.⁹⁵ In particular, as she pointed out in a late essay on 'Public Rights and Private Interests', there is a quite different time-scale involved. The public world which we inherit and pass on has long-term interests, whereas the private interests of mortal men are necessarily short term and have all the urgency of the life process.⁹⁶

The most dramatic instance of such a conflict is of course the summons, on which classical republicans had laid so much stress, to die in battle for one's patria. When Arendt affirmed the citizen's duty to put public above private life, and spoke of courage as the preeminent political virtue,⁹⁷ she must certainly have been mindful of such patriots as the Hungarians who faced Soviet tanks in 1956 in their doomed but glorious defence of their republic. But although (in the essay on 'Public Rights and Private Interests') she mentions in passing the possible sacrifice of life, she chooses to illustrate the activity of the citizen with a much less dramatic example – jury service. Jury service, which is often very inconvenient from a personal point of view, has nothing to do with promoting one's private interests. Instead, jurors share and serve the public interest in impartial justice.⁹⁸

This choice of illustration is revealingly characteristic of Arendt's reinterpretation of republicanism. Instead of the loss of individuality on the battlefield, citizenship calls up an image of participation in a public arena of discussion and debate about a matter of public interest. In sharp contrast to Rousseau's version of republicanism, in which the sacrifice of private interest means the submerging of individuals in a single body,⁹⁹ Arendt's public world is above all a public *space* lying between individuals, in which they can move, speak and act. This means that when the citizen moves from private to public life he is not leaving individuality behind. Instead, 'by virtue of his citizenship he receives a kind of second life in addition to his

citoyen of the French Revolution into the *bourgeois* of the pre-war period' ('Privileged Jews', *Jewish Social Studies* 8/1 (1946) 6).

⁹⁵ 'On Violence' 175.

⁹⁶ 'Public Rights and Private Interests' in M. Mooney and F. Stuber (ed.), *Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1977) 106; Cf. 'Freedom and Politics' 200.

⁹⁷ 'What is Freedom?' 156.

⁹⁸ 'Public Rights and Private Interests' 104–5. Arendt had herself served on a jury and been impressed by her fellow-jurors and by the conduct of the trial. See Arendt to Jaspers, 16 January 1967, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, ed. L. Köhler and H. Saner (Munich, Piper, 1985) 700.

⁹⁹ Rousseau, *Emile* 7.

private life',¹⁰⁰ and this 'second life' is actually more pluralistic and open, less oppressively unanimous than the private life he leaves behind.

Because Arendt shared with Rousseau a debt to the republican tradition, and often elaborated her views in opposition to his, an explicit contrast between the two thinkers can help to bring out some of the characteristic features of her position.¹⁰¹ Seeking a solution to the problem of how men can live together in freedom, Rousseau hit upon the notion of the General Will, which, as Arendt observed, converts a multitude into a single person.¹⁰² The trouble is that this dodges the very problem it is designed to solve, the fact that 'men, not man, live on the earth and inhabit the world'. According to Arendt, Rousseau avoids facing up to human plurality by constructing a scheme for collapsing all individuals into one, so that the problem of political obligation, for example, is reduced to a 'relation between me and myself'.¹⁰³

To Arendt, by contrast, the very starting-point of politics is that we are plural beings, and the great virtue of the agreements on which political institutions are based is that they bridge over the space between individuals rather than trying to make that space disappear. The point about a contract, for instance, lies in this spatial quality. Being something agreed upon *between* individuals, it cannot be abrogated simply by the will of one of the parties. It takes on a worldly existence outside and between the parties concerned, so that it can oblige them against their will, and thereby secure their future against their possible changes of mind. Arendt observed that although Rousseau entitled his book *The Social Contract*, the emphasis he put on the sovereignty of the will shows that he had never really thought about what a contract is.¹⁰⁴

The difference between her position and Rousseau's can in fact be summed up by saying that according to the former, citizens are held together not by a common will but by a common *world*, by sharing a common set of worldly institutions. This has the very important implication of leaving a great deal more personal and intellectual space between individuals than there is room for either in Rousseau's ideal state or in the many radical utopias he has inspired. In sharp contrast to all the various versions of the theory of the General Will, Arendt insists that there is no

¹⁰⁰ 'Public Rights and Private Interests' 103.

¹⁰¹ For a more extensive discussion, see M. Canovan, 'Arendt, Rousseau and Human Plurality in Politics', *Journal of Politics* 45 (1983) 286–302.

¹⁰² *OR* 77. ¹⁰³ 'Civil Disobedience' 84.

¹⁰⁴ 'From Machiavelli to Marx' 023487–8; *OR* 175. For a different reading of Rousseau that finds in him positions similar in many ways to those Arendt holds, see Barber, *Strong Democracy*, *passim*. Barber attributes to Arendt much the same sort of republican 'totalism' that she attributes to Rousseau, and does not realise how much her position has in common with his own (*Strong Democracy* 118).

need for people to be alike or to think alike in order to live together on terms of freedom and equality. What unites the citizens of a republic is that they inhabit the same public space, share its common concerns, acknowledge its rules and are committed to its continuance, and to achieving a working compromise when they differ. Citizens who are held together in this way can, for example, use majority voting simply as a technical device for settling differences of opinion, without mistaking the decision of the majority for the oracle of a single, united people.¹⁰⁵

The various attempts that had been made in political theory and practice to invent a single 'people' speaking with one voice seemed to Arendt to betray a complete failure to understand what politics is – namely, the arena within which human beings most comprehensively manifest their plurality. Unanimity is neither probable nor desirable. She believed that the craving for unanimity and the long-held belief that all rational men must think alike on public questions were among the distortions caused in political thinking by the dominance of an anti-political philosophical tradition. In so far as unanimity does occur, it seemed to her a danger signal, a sign that people had ceased to think. 'Mass unanimity is not the result of agreement, but an expression of fanaticism and hysteria.'¹⁰⁶ When reasonable people do exercise their minds upon their common affairs it is natural for them to see these affairs from different points of view and to form different opinions.¹⁰⁷

These different opinions should not be looked upon as arbitrarily subjective phenomena to be swept aside in favour of a single truth, for where they arise among people who share a common world, they reveal different aspects of the matter under consideration. Arendt claimed that the ancient Greek word for opinion, *doxa*, was derived from *dokei moi*, 'it appears to me',¹⁰⁸ reflecting the fact that different people see different sides of the same world. What the public space between citizens offers, therefore, is the opportunity of moving between different points of view by talking about common affairs.¹⁰⁹ This kind of continual talking and thinking in the presence of others enables citizens to develop what Arendt, borrowing the term from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, calls an 'enlarged mentality',¹¹⁰ giving them the opportunity to grasp reality, not in the single vision of the philosopher but in that many-sided common sense that is 'the political kind

¹⁰⁵ OR 164.

¹⁰⁶ 'To Save the Jewish Homeland' (1948), *The Jew as Pariah* 182. ¹⁰⁷ OR 225.

¹⁰⁸ 'The Concept of History', *Between Past and Future* 51; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) III 25; 'Philosophy and Politics' (ed. J. Kohn) in *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990) 80 ('Philosophy and Politics: the Problem of Action and Thought After the French Revolution' (1954) MSS Box 69, 023399).

¹⁰⁹ 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing' (1960), *Men in Dark Times* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970) 24–5.

¹¹⁰ 'The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and its Political Significance' 220; 'Truth and Politics' 241, both in *Between Past and Future*.

of insight *par excellence*.¹¹¹ Political thinking of this kind 'is truly discursive, running, as it were, from place to place' and giving rise to a process 'in which a particular issue is forced into the open that it may show itself from all sides, in every possible perspective, until it is flooded and made transparent by the full light of human comprehension'.¹¹²

In spite of Arendt's fear that the interests of politics and of philosophy were opposed, therefore, (a fear that we shall be exploring in the next chapter) she believed that rich intellectual benefits were to be gained from sharing a public space with others. Besides common sense, the exchange of opinions makes possible *judgement*, which was to have been the subject of the third, unwritten volume of Arendt's final work, *The Life of the Mind*.¹¹³ This is a faculty that requires the firm hold on the many-sidedness of reality that comes from sharing a world with others (at the opposite pole to the insane logic of the totalitarian ideologist or of the paranoiac who lives in a world of his own).¹¹⁴ It also underlies *impartiality*, that even-handedness to friends and foes which is so conspicuous a quality of the Greek poets and historians and which was made possible, Arendt thought, only by 'long experience in polis-life, which to an incredibly large extent consisted of citizens talking with one another'.¹¹⁵ A more subtle intellectual benefit that comes from sharing a public sphere with others, and one which Arendt tried to articulate in the essay on Lessing in which she argues eloquently against the philosophical ideal of rational unanimity, is that continual talk about common affairs 'humanizes' the world, making it a place that people can share on terms of friendship.¹¹⁶

Thinking of this public space in which citizens continually share their different points of view and develop their opinions in the course of their conversations, Arendt claims that without free speech, freedom of thought is not possible.¹¹⁷ Even at an intellectual level, therefore, the move from

¹¹¹ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023402 (*Social Research* (1990) 84). Cf. 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik', 13a.

¹¹² 'Truth and Politics' 242. Cf. *HC* 57; *OR* 225–9; B. Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 1981) 143–9; S.K. Hinchman, 'Common Sense and Political Barbarism in the Thought of Hannah Arendt' *Polity* 17/2 (1984) 325–30. ¹¹³ *L of M* II 242–3, 255–72.

¹¹⁴ 'The Crisis in Culture' 220–3; *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982): see especially Beiner's 'Interpretive Essay'; 'Ideology and Terror' 471–8. See also R.J. Bernstein, 'Judging – the Actor and the Spectator' in Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Cambridge, Polity, 1986) 228–30; E. Vollrath, 'Hannah Arendt über Meinung und Urteilskraft' in A. Reif (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: Materialien in ihrem Werk* (Vienna/Munich/Zurich 1979) 85–107.

¹¹⁵ 'The Concept of History' 51. ¹¹⁶ 'On Humanity in Dark Times' 24–5.

¹¹⁷ 'Revolution and Freedom: A Lecture' in H. Tramer (ed.), *In zwei Welten: Siegfried Moses zum fünfundsiebzigsten Geburtstag* (Tel Aviv, Bitan, 1962) 597; *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* 39–43.

private life to the life of the citizen is not simply a matter of self-sacrifice, but of entering a public sphere that is richly rewarding.

Besides this, of course, citizenship also bestows the freedom to appear in public, 'to be seen in action'.¹¹⁸ For it was one of Arendt's chief objections to the tradition of political philosophy that, by interpreting politics simply as a means of pursuing private benefits, it had almost totally obscured the exalted pleasures of engaging in public affairs. As a result, people who experienced these pleasures in times of crisis, like the American Founding Fathers or the members of the French Resistance, tended to find themselves without a vocabulary in which to articulate their experiences.¹¹⁹ Arendt maintained, nevertheless, that these pleasures of citizenship must have been known to the *philosophes* of eighteenth century France who demanded 'public freedom' from the monarch – not a private space in which to hide, but a public space in which to act.¹²⁰ In the American colonies, where this freedom was already enjoyed, it was known as 'public happiness' and 'consisted in the citizen's right of access to the public realm, in his share in public power'.¹²¹

Arendt's reiteration of the republican theme of the need to sacrifice private interests is complemented, therefore, by her claim that this sacrifice is more than repaid by the happiness inherent in actively sharing responsibility for the 'public thing'.¹²² The enormous stress she places upon the value of public action should be read in the context of her attempt to remind the 'unpolitical' German and the even less traditionally political Jew of the obligations inherent in citizenship.

Within the classical republican tradition, citizenship had always been presented as a way of life so demanding that it was no wonder republics were rare. If citizens need almost superhuman 'virtue' to sustain their republics, it is no surprise that ordinary, 'corrupt' mortals put up with being subjects. As we have seen, however, citizenship as understood by Arendt is much less Spartan and much more obviously rewarding, and yet, like the pessimists of the republican tradition, she believed that very few of the human race were likely to be capable of it. The obvious question raised by her vision of the public life of the citizen is, why have so few people been attracted to a way of life so rich in opportunities for speech and action?

Arendt had three sorts of answers to this question, finding explanations in Western philosophical traditions, in social conditions and in the

¹¹⁸ OR 130.

¹¹⁹ OR 129; 'Action and the 'Pursuit of Happiness'' in *Politische Ordnung und menschliche Existenz: Festgabe für Eric Voegelin* (Munich, Beck, 1962) 1–16; 'Preface: the Gap Between Past and Future', *Between Past and Future* 4–6.

¹²⁰ OR 124. Cf. Beiner, 'Action, Natality and Citizenship' 352–3, 366–8.

¹²¹ OR 127.

¹²² 'Public Rights and Private Interests' 106; 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' 203.

constitutional deficiencies of otherwise sound political structures like the USA. In the first place, as we have seen, she claimed that the tradition of political thinking had been dominated since its origins by the anti-political bias of philosophers like Plato, who had neglected and suppressed specifically political experiences. Since the entire vocabulary of political thought had been distorted by this philosophical bias, generations of potential citizens had never become aware of the nature and possibilities of politics, while even those who had accidentally rediscovered the joys of public speech and action had had great difficulty in finding a language in which to articulate and pass on their experiences.¹²³ The most ambitious aim of Arendt's own political thought was to remedy this deficiency.

Bemusement by the philosophical vapours still generated by Plato's 'foggy mind'¹²⁴ was not a sufficient explanation for the neglect of citizenship, however. The tragedy, as Arendt saw it, and as she tried to describe it in *On Revolution*, was that at the very moment in the eighteenth century when, in the course of the American and French Revolutions, men accidentally rediscovered public freedom and emancipated themselves from the bias of the philosophical tradition, *social* factors emerged to divert their attention away from citizenship once again. There were two aspects to this social threat to republicanism, exemplified, she thought, in the experience of the French Revolution on the one hand and of post-revolutionary America on the other.

What ruined the French Revolution was the 'social question' – the emergence of poverty as a political issue rather than as a mere fact of life. As the French revolutionaries savoured their first taste of public freedom and attempted to draw up a constitution that would establish a permanent space for public speech and action, their revolt against the old regime mobilised crowds of poor and hungry people with urgent economic grievances. Once the needs of the desperately poor were actually exposed to public view and treated with respect, they were (as matters of life and death) bound to seem vastly more important than political matters to do with the establishment of a free constitution.

This experience seemed to Arendt to make manifest a number of unwelcome truths. One of them was that, since life on the verge of starvation always *had* been the condition of most of mankind, political freedom for a few had in the past been made possible, like other aspects of civilisation, only by the violent repression that extracted a surplus from slaves or serfs.¹²⁵ Another point conclusively demonstrated by the French

¹²³ 'Preface: the Gap Between Past and Future' 5–6. ¹²⁴ OR 129.

¹²⁵ OR 114. Arendt was acutely aware of the 'violent injustice' of ancient slavery (HC 119) and of the 'fundamental crime' of black slavery in America (Arendt in Klein, *Dissent, Power and Confrontation* 115).

and subsequent revolutions was that although revolution may put the social question on the agenda, it does nothing to solve it. Attempts to cure poverty by political means, however well-intentioned, simply lead to more violence: only economic growth can do the trick.¹²⁶ But in the wake of the great revolutions, the aspiration to freedom can no longer be restricted to a small section of the population; equality is, for good or ill, firmly on the political agenda. The implication is that political freedom is now possible only in the absence of mass poverty, so that many, perhaps most countries in the world are not plausible locations for republican political systems.¹²⁷ Contemporary experiences of revolution seemed to her to bear out this point. The Hungarian Revolution was the only case since the American where (Arendt believed) 'the question of bread, of poverty, of the order of society, played no role whatsoever, which was entirely political in the sense that the people fought for nothing but freedom'. But this neglect of the social question was made possible only by the changes previously wrought by the communist regime. Wherever revolution broke out in conditions of mass poverty and economic backwardness, as in Cuba, the tragedy of the French Revolution could only be repeated: the marvellous exhilaration of liberation for the down-trodden, followed by the inexorable slide into tyranny.¹²⁸

In a sense, Arendt's recognition that 'liberation from necessity, because of its urgency, always takes precedence over the building of freedom'¹²⁹ may not seem grounds for pessimism about the long-term prospects for republicanism. Although "'public happiness" . . . is a luxury; it is an *additional* happiness that one is made capable of only after the requirements of the life process have been fulfilled',¹³⁰ technological developments appear to show that poverty can in principle be overcome and that 'the wreckage of freedom on the rock of necessity . . . is no longer unavoidable'.¹³¹ Unfortunately, it seemed to her that economic growth was a very mixed blessing for politics. For the very same technological and economic developments that had made possible the conquest of poverty were themselves aspects of modern materialism, and of the shift of emphasis, traced in *The Human Condition*, from all other human activities to production and consumption. The USA in particular, after being spared the desperate poverty that wrecked the French Revolution, had become the most advanced example of a society devoted to consumption. If the French revolutionary mob had been too poor to be citizens, modern Americans,

¹²⁶ OR 114; 'Revolution and Freedom' 594, 598.

¹²⁷ 'Revolution and Freedom' 590; Arendt in Klein, *Dissent, Power and Confrontation* 132.

¹²⁸ 'Revolution and Freedom' 599. The tone of Arendt's references to the Cuban Revolution is markedly more sympathetic to those involved than in her discussion of social revolution in *On Revolution*. ¹²⁹ 'Revolution and Freedom' 598.

¹³⁰ 'Public Rights and Private Interests' 106. ¹³¹ 'Revolution and Freedom' 598.

Arendt thought (echoing classical republican invective against 'luxury and corruption') were too much immersed in the pursuit of affluence. 'While it is true that freedom can only come to those whose needs have been fulfilled, it is equally true that it will escape those who are bent upon living for their desires.'¹³²

Social conditions, whether of poverty or of riches, therefore seemed to conspire with a distorting philosophical tradition to keep people from the joys of citizenship. Not that Arendt was quite as pessimistic about the possibility of public spirit in the modern USA as she sometimes sounded. One of the first things that struck her when she arrived in America, and which she was at pains to explain to European friends, was the contrast between American society and American politics: between what seemed to her refined European tastes the appalling consumerism of the American masses on the one hand, and the willingness of ordinary people to involve themselves to some extent in public affairs on the other. She continued throughout her life there to be convinced that America was the freest country in the world.¹³³ What worried her, however, was that there was little in the constitutional structure of the United States to *remind* Americans that they were citizens as well as consumers. To Arendt, as to Jefferson, 'the danger was that all power had been given to the people in their private capacity and that there was no space established for them in their capacity of being citizens'.¹³⁴ For if the individual is given a vote in a secret ballot, but no public arena in which to join with others in debating public affairs, he is liable to do what American voters were in fact doing in enormous numbers, namely to use his vote as a means of defending his private interests, something to be bartered to politicians in return for election promises. Representative government therefore seemed to her a standing invitation to corruption, and it is in this light that we need to consider her much derided preference for a participatory system composed of 'councils'.

Participation and councils

Critics have frequently drawn attention to Arendt's marked lack of enthusiasm for the workings of modern representative democracy with its apparatus of mass parties, professional politicians, and campaigns addressed largely to voters' economic interests.¹³⁵ Biographically, the fact

¹³² OR 139.

¹³³ Arendt to Jaspers, 29 January 1946, *Briefwechsel* 66–7; 'Civil Disobedience' 94–102; 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' 202–3; 'Home to Roost: a Bicentennial Address', *New York Review of Books* (26 June 1975) 3; Arendt in Klein, *Dissent, Power and Confrontation* 216. ¹³⁴ OR 253.

¹³⁵ The most comprehensive criticism is that in Kateb, *Hannah Arendt* ch. 4.

that she had, as she put it, never been 'greatly in love with the party system'¹³⁶ is no doubt traceable to her experience with the shaky systems of Weimar Germany and inter-war France. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she distinguished parties from totalitarian *movements*, but she also argued that the multi-party systems of continental Europe were extremely vulnerable to totalitarian take-over, and tended at best toward single-party dictatorship.¹³⁷ But early experiences are not enough to explain her continued reservations about representative democracy, because she had conceded from the start that the 'Anglo-Saxon' two-party system was different. As we saw, she argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that this had been an important factor in saving Britain from the totalitarian movements to which British imperialism could easily have given rise.¹³⁸ In *On Revolution*, stressing the fundamental difference between political systems based on centralised sovereignty and those informed by diffused power, she lumped dictatorships together with European multi-party systems on the 'unfree' side of the fence, and insisted on the difference between them and the British and American systems, in which legitimate opposition was part of a general diffusion of power.¹³⁹ Why, then, was she still so critical of representative democracy as practised in the USA?

The first step towards understanding her position here is to appreciate its complexity. Arendt was most definitely *not* saying, in the manner of Marcuse's acolytes in the 1960s, that in terms of freedom there was nothing to choose between the USA and the Soviet Union. On the contrary, she argued that representative democracy as it functions in Britain and the USA really is effective in protecting civil liberties, and that this is no small thing. Limited government is vastly different from tyranny, let alone from totalitarianism, and Arendt did not wish to deny this distinction. Her point was, however, that the enjoyment of civil rights as a private person, however rare and valuable it may be, is not the same thing as being the citizen of a republic and enjoying political freedom. 'For political freedom . . . means the right "to be a participator in government", or it means nothing'.¹⁴⁰

In the complex argument of *On Revolution* Arendt maintained that the revolutionary attempt to found political freedom in this republican sense had succumbed to social pressures of two kinds, one dramatic and the other more insidious. The dramatic eclipse of freedom occurred, of course, in the French Revolution, when impoverished masses overwhelmed the political arena with their demand for a political cure for poverty, and thereby gave rise to a tyranny in which neither political freedom nor civil liberty

¹³⁶ Arendt in Klein, *Dissent, Power and Confrontation* 212.

¹³⁷ OTI 250–65. Cf. OR 266.

¹³⁸ OTI 252–5.

¹³⁹ OR 267–8.

¹⁴⁰ OR 218, 268.

survived. In the American Revolution, social pressures of this dramatic kind were absent, and the Founding Fathers did succeed in establishing a constitution that circumscribed a realm of public freedom. Even there, however, it seemed to Arendt that tensions of a more subtle kind between the political and social realms persisted. For although a public realm of republican institutions had indeed been established, most citizens remained in effect outside it. 'Public happiness' had been rediscovered in the course of revolution, but how could its spirit be preserved after the revolution was over?

According to Arendt's reading of their speeches and writings, this was something that worried both Robespierre and Jefferson in their different ways. She finds in Robespierre a reluctance to bring the revolution to a conclusion which reflected a fear that public life would disappear into the exercise of civil liberty, and in Jefferson a parallel fear that the Constitution itself might stifle political action and innovation.¹⁴¹ Anarchic schemes for permanent revolution are neither feasible nor desirable, but they do seem to Arendt to point to yet another difficulty inherent in the republican project. For even if 'social' distractions can be avoided, the 'revolutionary spirit' itself has two aspects that are not easy to balance in practice, on the one hand 'the exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning' and on the other the concern to found a solid and durable body politic. The problem is how to *combine* stable institutions and free action.¹⁴²

Given the extreme difficulty of this enterprise, Arendt considered that the American Republic was a remarkable success. Not only had it given its inhabitants civil liberties, but it had also existed for two hundred years as a public realm within which public freedom could in principle be enjoyed.¹⁴³ The trouble was, however, that unless they exercised the citizens' right of assembly, as the anti-Vietnam War demonstrators did,¹⁴⁴ ordinary citizens had no opportunity to enjoy that public freedom, which was reserved for politicians. The system of parties and elections effectively represented citizens' interests, but it did not make them participators in the public world.¹⁴⁵

It was this system of representation by means of parties, not American democracy as a whole, that Arendt found objectionable. Her admiration for the overall framework of the Constitution was very great, and many manifestations of citizenship, such as the demonstrations against the

¹⁴¹ OR 132-3, 233-4.

¹⁴² OR 223. For prolonged wrestling with this problem in a totally different style, see R.M. Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹⁴³ 'Home to Roost' 3.

¹⁴⁴ 'Public Rights and Private Interests' 104; 'Civil Disobedience' 94-102.

¹⁴⁵ OR 269.

Vietnam War, led her to feel, as she wrote to Karl Jaspers, that America was perhaps the only country in the world where republican politics had a chance.¹⁴⁶ Watching the televised hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Vietnam in 1966, she commented on how unimaginable such a phenomenon would be in any other country, and even speculated that television, used in this way, might give a new meaning to mass democracy.¹⁴⁷ But although in some respects American citizens did manage to form their opinions in public debate, and did sometimes take action about their public affairs, this happened only informally, without the shelter of an institutional structure. Instead, the structure that did normally link citizens to government was a system of electoral representation that positively encouraged people not to think and act as citizens. Hence her interest in the possibility of a different kind of intermediate institutional structure that would connect the citizen to government not by means of parties but through federated 'councils'.¹⁴⁸

This 'council' system, with which, as she admitted, she had a 'romantic sympathy',¹⁴⁹ was not her own invention, but something which had, she claimed, repeatedly emerged in embryo in the course of grass-roots action in revolutions. It was the brief re-emergence of this sort of political institution during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 that led her to regard it as a practical possibility.¹⁵⁰ In each case the movement had been crushed before it could be properly established, but it seemed to her to be a genuine alternative to the party system, with roots at least as deep in revolutionary experience. Even during the French Revolution, spontaneously formed popular bodies had come into conflict with the Jacobins, and while their purpose was often to put pressure on the revolutionary leaders to satisfy socio-economic demands, they also at times represented the cause of citizenship and devolution of power versus centralisation and professional party politics.¹⁵¹

What seemed particularly striking was the way in which, without any theory of popular organisation to pass on the message, similar grass-roots

¹⁴⁶ Arendt to Jaspers, 26 June 1968, *Briefwechsel* 716; OR 138.

¹⁴⁷ Arendt to Jaspers, 19 February 1966, *Briefwechsel* 662.

¹⁴⁸ J.F. Sitton, 'Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy', *Polity* 20/1 (Fall 1987) 80–100. Cf. the much more concrete proposals in Barber, *Strong Democracy* 261–311.

¹⁴⁹ 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' in Hill, *Hannah Arendt* 327. It may not be coincidental that enthusiasm for these 'councils' emerges in Arendt's published work at the point when she had become convinced that 'labour' bore some of the responsibility for totalitarianism. Her earlier romantic sympathy with 'the people' and the 'labour movement' may have been displaced on to participatory democracy a decade before many people on the Left performed the same evolution.

¹⁵⁰ 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd edition (London, Allen and Unwin, 1958) 497–500.

¹⁵¹ OR 245.

bodies had sprung up spontaneously in revolution after revolution, in 1870 in France, in 1905 and 1917 in Russia, in 1918–19 in Germany and then in 1956 in Hungary, not as parties or ideological movements but as public spaces in which people could discuss and take action upon their common affairs. She is careful to stress that these were ‘organs of order as much as organs of action’,¹⁵² and we should realise that, unlike some enthusiasts for ‘participation’, Arendt was not in the least attracted by formless anarchy or ‘dropping out’.¹⁵³ On the contrary, she maintained that although in each case the councils had been suppressed before they had been able to unfold their potentialities, they had persistently shown a tendency to federate and to build a pyramidal structure of representatives sent on from lower to higher councils that could form a practical alternative to the party method of representation.¹⁵⁴

The advantages of such a system in her eyes would be that citizens would be able to participate directly in politics through their local council, that representatives to the next level would be chosen for their personal qualities rather than their ideological party alignment, and that the electoral system of bribing an apathetic electorate with promises of private gain would be by-passed. Although she does not make clear how the pyramid of councils might mesh with Congress, she evidently believed that a system of this kind would be an extension downwards of the separation and balancing of powers she valued so much in the US Constitution, and would generate greater power by mobilising popular support for the republic. At the level of international politics, she thought that states with internal structures of this thoroughly federal kind would find it easier to deal peacefully with one another than did centralised states that were perpetually jealous of their sovereignty.¹⁵⁵

Arendt’s repeated references to the ‘council’ system make unambiguously clear that the idea was important to her. What is much less certain is whether she regarded it as a practical possibility in the foreseeable future. While her account in *On Revolution* reads almost like a proposal for reform, elsewhere she was much more cautious. In one discussion before a radical audience, while pointing to the potentialities of councils, she also reminded her listeners that they had always perished, and added that we needed to ask why this was so. She went on to doubt whether such forms of direct democracy could possibly have any relevance in the disintegrating cities of contemporary America.¹⁵⁶ On another occasion (in the course of an

¹⁵² *OR* 263. ¹⁵³ ‘Thoughts on Politics and Revolution’ 232.

¹⁵⁴ *OR* 267. In ‘Thoughts on Politics and Revolution’, 232, she speaks of this sort of federation from below leading to ‘a parliament’.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Thoughts on Politics and Revolution’ 230.

¹⁵⁶ Arendt in Klein, *Dissent, Power and Confrontation* 218.

interview with Adelbert Reif in 1970) she proffered the view that the prospects of any such system being established anywhere were 'very slight, if at all. And yet perhaps, after all – in the wake of the next revolution.'¹⁵⁷ If she had lived to see the East European revolutions of 1989 she would certainly have been greatly heartened to see ordinary citizens acting together to generate power and freedom, but might have been disappointed by the speed with which they moved toward party systems. Although demands for the restoration of the multi-party system had been made in Hungary in 1956, she had dismissed this as an automatic reaction to the years of one-party dictatorship, not a serious political initiative on a par with the councils.¹⁵⁸

For most of Arendt's readers her views in this area are something of an embarrassment, a curiously unrealistic commitment in someone who laid particular stress on realism in politics.¹⁵⁹ Even as an ideal, the model she describes is fatally damaged by the view of economics which we noticed in an earlier chapter in connection with her concept of 'society'. Only her assumptions about the convergence of capitalism and socialism on provision for a collective life process can explain her belief that economic matters in affluent societies are essentially uncontroversial and therefore unpolitical, and that her councils would be able to stay out of the economic decisions taken by professional administrators, leaving the material welfare of the society to be looked after without needing to be on the political agenda.¹⁶⁰

The feature of Arendt's 'council' system that has upset most readers, however, arises not so much out of lack of realism as because she faces squarely up to a problem that enthusiasts for participation tend to dodge. This is that the current system of representation suits a great many of us because we do not want to be citizens; we want to get on with our private lives undisturbed, while having our material wants taken care of by politicians greedy for our votes. In a system of direct democracy, what happens to those who don't attend meetings? On this subject, Arendt is outrageously blunt. 'Anyone who is not interested in public affairs will simply have to be satisfied with their being decided without him.'¹⁶¹ In other words, the end of the system of parties and general elections would

¹⁵⁷ 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' 233.

¹⁵⁸ 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution' 499.

¹⁵⁹ Though see Sitton, 'Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy'. One of the oddities of her position is that she paid so little attention to the cantons of Switzerland, which offer one of the few functioning models of direct democracy. The answer may lie in what she herself called her perhaps unjustified antipathy to the Swiss (Arendt to Jaspers, 4 September 1947, *Briefwechsel* 133).

¹⁶⁰ *OR* 273–4; 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 317–19.

¹⁶¹ 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' 233.

also mean the end of universal suffrage, since, while all would have the opportunity to participate in the local council, those who did not attend would have to put up with decisions being taken in their absence. Those who wish to be 'citoyens' can do so; those who are content to be 'bourgeois' or 'labourers' will be left out. Arendt's claim for the council system is not (as participationists have often fondly hoped) that it would do away with 'elitism', but that it would replace an elite of professional politicians with a genuinely political elite into which any citizen might have access if he was personally trusted by other citizens.¹⁶²

Her point is partly the practical observation that, since action and the formation of political opinion is something that can happen only in a public space,¹⁶³ there simply is no substitute for actually being involved in the debate and joining in the decisions. Marking a cross in a solitary voting booth is not at all the same thing.¹⁶⁴ No doubt, however, her doubts about universal suffrage were also influenced by a certain distrust of the mass of ordinary voters – a distrust that is scarcely surprising in a Jew who had seen the rise of Hitler, who had witnessed McCarthyism in the United States, and who feared that citizens who had any understanding of or concern for republican principles were few and far between. She suggested in *On Revolution* that at the root of the continual emergence of an 'elite' in politics may be seen 'the bitter need of the few . . . to protect the island of freedom they have come to inhabit against the surrounding sea of necessity; and . . . the responsibility that falls automatically upon those who care for the fate of those who do not'.¹⁶⁵

The particularly bleak and embattled tone of the final pages of *On Revolution*, in which she makes these points, should perhaps be connected with the trial of Eichmann, on which she was reflecting and writing at the time. There was plenty of evidence ready to hand of the willingness of most ordinary people to go along with tyranny and worse things. There is more than this to Arendt's 'elitism', however. It should not be seen as a simple outcome of her experiences with twentieth-century masses, for it has its place also within a complex and long-continued train of thought about equality and politics, and particularly about the problems of trying to reconcile the republican principle of equal citizenship with the demands of modern society.

¹⁶² OR 279–80.

¹⁶³ OR 268–9; Hinchman, 'Common Sense and Barbarism' 320–30.

¹⁶⁴ She would no doubt have endorsed Benjamin Barber's graphic account of voting as 'rather like using a public toilet: we wait in line with a crowd in order to close ourselves up in a small compartment where we can relieve ourselves in solitude and in privacy of our burden, pull a lever, and then, yielding to the next in line, go silently home', *Strong Democracy* 188.

¹⁶⁵ OR 276.

Citizenship and equality

Equality, as Arendt often reminded her readers, is one of the basic principles of republican politics. The experience of moving among one's peers was (along with the complementary experience of trying to distinguish oneself from them) among those fundamental political experiences which, she thought, underlay the basic types of political system, and which Montesquieu had identified in *l'Esprit des lois*. She interpreted the 'virtue' so dear to the hearts of classical republicans as love of equality, a continuous celebration of 'the joy not to be alone in the world. For only insofar as I am among my equals, am I not alone.'¹⁶⁶ But this equality, which the free citizens of republics had enjoyed since the time of the Greeks, was a specifically *political* equality which had nothing whatever to do with the modern liberal idea that all men are born equal. Arendt even maintained that these two different concepts of equality were diametrically opposed to one another, since the whole point of the republican version was that people who are *unequal* by nature can be equalised in the artificial world of the polis by the man-made laws and institutions that they all share.¹⁶⁷ Like power and freedom, republican equality is not something that individuals can possess in themselves, but is a feature of the political space between citizens who inhabit the same political world.¹⁶⁸

Classical republican equality was not only an artificial political construction rather than a natural endowment, but it was also severely limited in its application. In the first place it applied only in the public realm, and had no implications for equality in private life. Secondly, it applied only to citizens, who had historically been a minority of the population of republics, and whose enjoyment of equal freedom had depended on the *inequality* between them and the labourers and women whom they forced to shoulder the burden of material cares.¹⁶⁹ Thirdly, republican equality had always applied only to the citizens of a particular state, not to mankind in general. The idea that political principles should apply to humanity as a whole is, Arendt observed, very much a modern innovation.¹⁷⁰

Most of the modern political thinkers who find inspiration in the classical republican tradition would no doubt concede these points about the historic limitations of citizenship, but would propose to update and amend republicanism simply by taking what had been the rights of a few and extending them to all humanity. What makes Arendt's position distinctive

¹⁶⁶ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) III 34; See also 'The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism' (1953) MSS Box 68, 4; 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (1st MS) 26. ¹⁶⁷ OR 30-1.

¹⁶⁸ 'The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism' 4.

¹⁶⁹ HC 31; OR 114; 'Revolution and Freedom' 590; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 19.

¹⁷⁰ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 16.

(and gives rise to many of the passages in her books that most worry her readers) is that she had grave doubts about this programme. It seemed to her to be far from easy to extend equal republican citizenship to all. The general modern belief in natural equality did not make this any easier, but tended instead to obscure the problems involved.

The modern demand for equal freedom for all was, in Arendt's view, one of the legacies of the French Revolution,¹⁷¹ an irrevocable result of that historic moment when the poor appeared for the first time as actors on the stage of history. Christian beliefs about equality before God certainly contributed to this, but not decisively, for Christianity had existed for nearly two thousand years without producing more than marginal demands for political equality.¹⁷² More to the point, economic development with its accompanying rise in the status of labour had given a new dignity to formerly despised labourers.¹⁷³

Whatever the causes, modern politics since the early nineteenth century had been informed by the momentous aim of establishing equal freedom, not just for a restricted group of citizens in a few small republics, but for all mankind, all classes and all races. The first point that Arendt tries to get across to her readers is what an awe-inspiring undertaking this is. Human equality is not a datum but a *project*, something to be established, if at all, only by political means. Liberal political theory had, in her view, made this hard for us to understand because we have so often been told that men are born equal. But this common assumption seemed to her desperately misleading. The fact that we are all born human does not in itself give us any political rights or political standing. The various liberal theories about states of nature encouraged us to believe that people who are outside a political community are endowed with equal natural rights. But in *Totalitarianism* Arendt invited her readers to look at the position of the vast numbers of people who found themselves stateless at the end of the First World War, people who were indeed outside political communities, who had been in a sense thrust back into a 'state of nature', stripped of everything except their humanity. Even among modern Europeans brought up on centuries of thinking in terms of equal natural rights, these people had turned out to have no political standing. 'The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human', for '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.'¹⁷⁴ Arendt rams the same lesson home in her deliberately shocking observation on the way in which

¹⁷¹ 'Revolution and Freedom' 590; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 7.

¹⁷² HC 215; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (2nd draft) III 33.

¹⁷³ HC 41; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 7.

¹⁷⁴ OT1 296. Cf. OR 108.

Europeans reacted when they were confronted with 'natural' men in Africa. Far from recognising the natural equality in rights of these men who were living in a 'state of nature', the Europeans massacred them without even noticing that they were committing murder.

The point is that equality of rights is not something we have been given by nature, but a political project to be realised, 'an equality of human purpose'.¹⁷⁵ 'Equality . . . is not given us, but is the result of human organisation insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice. We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights. Our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization.'¹⁷⁶ To produce this political equality even for a few citizens in an isolated city-state was a considerable achievement: to aim at equality for the human race is a project of awesome proportions, dangerously close to hubris.¹⁷⁷

It is important to recognise that it is also, to Arendt, an inspiring project and one demanded by the principle of justice.¹⁷⁸ To see her as an opponent of equal political rights for all is a serious misinterpretation, although it is one which easily arises because she is not optimistic in facing the problems and hazards of this project.¹⁷⁹ For she emphasises that the demand for universal equality has since the early nineteenth century led modern men into politically uncharted waters. Such a demand meant a complete break with previous political thinking, not only with the dominant tradition of rule by kings, but also and especially with a republican tradition that had celebrated the equal freedom of citizens while taking for granted that those citizens ruled over others.¹⁸⁰ She feared that the easiest and most likely solution to this problem was a condition of equal *unfreedom* in which people were 'equalized' on the basis of their common physical needs in a society of labourers with no freedom for anyone. As we saw when looking at her reflections on Marxism, she believed that Marx's attempt to wrestle with the problem of freeing the proletariat had in fact turned into a programme for liberating the life-process of the animal species 'man-kind',¹⁸¹ a programme that led at best to bureaucratic stultification and at worst to Stalinism. Modern representative democracy, in which universal suffrage gave votes to people who were entirely preoccupied with their

¹⁷⁵ OTI 234. ¹⁷⁶ OTI 297.

¹⁷⁷ One of the implications of the new sense of worldwide humanity, according to Arendt, is that we must now take collective responsibility not just for what our own group does but for the deeds and crimes of human beings in general (OTI 235-6, 436).

¹⁷⁸ OTI 54, 439; 'Revolution and Freedom' 591.

¹⁷⁹ My own earlier work on Arendt underestimates the radical humanitarian side of her thought.

¹⁸⁰ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 6-8.

¹⁸¹ OR 62-4.

material existence, was of course vastly preferable to Stalinism, but still seemed to her to carry dangers of a society in which everyone was the same and no one was free.¹⁸²

For *sameness* is different from equality. The latter is a political condition in which people who are not the same are equalised by sharing a common political world that has space for their differences – differences of interest and opinion, of religion and ethnicity and of sheer individuality. The distinction between sameness and equality is not an easy one to hold on to in practical politics, however, and one of Arendt's worries was that as a result of confusion between the two the ideal of equality can easily make people hostile to all differences, particularly to racial differences which, being natural and unchangeable, become even more conspicuous as other differences are eliminated.¹⁸³

Some of the most vivid and painful passages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* describe the difficulties the Boers and other Europeans had in coming to terms with the fact that the native Africans who looked so different and lived such primitive lives were really human beings like themselves. Racism, Arendt argues, was in its origins a response to the 'horrifying experience of something alien beyond imagination or comprehension; it was tempting indeed simply to declare that these were not human beings'.¹⁸⁴ But to liberals who would like to think that ethnic differences should at any rate be easy to live with once people get to know one another, she insists that the problems involved are not simply a matter of the shock of strangeness. Speaking of the appeal of racism in Eastern Europe, where different peoples had for centuries lived mixed together, she observed that 'the more peoples know about one another, the less they want to recognize other peoples as their equals, the more they recoil from the ideal of humanity'.¹⁸⁵

Equal rights for all humanity are, in fact, contrary to nature. This is not an *objection* to equality, since, as we have seen over and over again, Arendt did not believe that 'nature' prescribed criteria to human beings, but took the humanist view that civilisation is and must be built in defiance of nature. What it does imply, however, is that, like the rest of civilisation, equality does not come easily, and has costs. In particular, neither the most perfect political equality nor even the most stifling social homogeneity can alter the physical differences between human beings, but may simply throw them into relief, forcing racial differences on to the political agenda. It therefore seemed particularly important to her to be clear about the nature and also the limits of equal citizenship.

It is in the light of this train of thought that we should read her notorious and much misunderstood intervention in the controversy over school

¹⁸² HC 130.¹⁸³ OTI 54.¹⁸⁴ OTI 195.¹⁸⁵ OTI 235.

desegregation in the American South, 'Reflections on Little Rock', in which she upset many of her liberal friends by opposing federal intervention to enforce racial integration.¹⁸⁶ What she tried to do in that article was to draw a distinction between equal citizenship and social homogeneity which was in line with the distinction between 'citoyen' and 'bourgeois' that had been present in her thought since the 1940s. Equality of rights in the political world of the republic was, she argued, the basic principle of the American political system. It was therefore a matter of fundamental importance that all citizens regardless of race should be assured of political rights such as the right to vote (often denied to blacks in the South) and personal rights such as the right to marry whom one pleased, which was contravened by anti-miscegenation laws in Southern states. Where constitutional rights like this were at stake, the federal authorities could and should intervene. Similarly, laws preventing desegregation of schools and other public facilities seemed to Arendt to be obviously unconstitutional, contrary to the principle of equal laws for all citizens. Within that framework of equal laws, however, it seemed to her dangerously foolhardy to try to enforce social equality. Blacks and whites should not be prevented by law from marrying one another, but they could not be *forced* by law to do so: and similarly, while children of different races should not be prevented by law from attending mixed schools, they should not be forced to do so either.

The choice of education as an issue on which to fight racism offended her because it pushed children into the battle-line. But the whole project of trying to overcome social differences seemed to her both futile and dangerous, dangerous partly because of the strain it put upon the popular consent at the base of the republic, and partly because (remembering the Jews of Weimar Germany) she feared that even if black people were to achieve social equality, this might only sharpen racial tensions rather than remove them. The dangerously hubristic attempt to abolish all differences could easily endanger the difficult but perhaps attainable ideal of equal citizenship in the political realm. As we saw in an earlier chapter, one of her purposes in writing about the 'human condition' was to try to make clear the narrow course that political men must steer between the Scylla of determinism and the Charybdis of believing that everything is possible.

Community, nation and republic

Arendt's concern to distinguish sheer *sameness* from a genuinely political equality that allows space between plural individuals has another import-

¹⁸⁶ 'Reflections on Little Rock', *Dissent* 6/1 (Winter 1959) 45–56. See also 'A Reply to Critics', *Dissent* 6/2 (Spring 1959) 179–81.

ant implication, which is that a republic as she understands it is not equivalent to a community, still less to a nation. The adverse attention attracted by her concept of the 'social' as contrasted with the 'political' (which we examined above) has tended to obscure another distinction which is less explicitly made but which pervades her thought, that between citizenship and community. We saw that 'society' as she uses the term does not mean *Gesellschaft* as opposed to *Gemeinschaft*, and has nothing to do with the familiar opposition between 'artificial' modern individualism and 'natural' warm community. On the contrary, since 'society' represented for Arendt an 'unnatural growth of the natural', no such contrast was possible, and she tended to treat natural 'community' and pseudo-natural 'society' as continuous with one another. Her distaste for modern society does not imply any nostalgia for traditional community, and in distinguishing politics from the 'social' she also distinguishes it from the communal.

What this means in practice is that the artificial public space shared by citizens of a republic does not have to be based on or coincide with any natural community of race, ethnicity or religion. Arendt's republicanism directly challenges the modern assumption that political legitimacy lies with the nation-state. While the sources of this disjunction between citizenship and community may be found in her personal history, it is supported by her analysis of nationalism and connected with many aspects of her republican thinking.

It was personal experience that first made Arendt aware of the difference between citizenship and national identity, for any German Jew who lived through the Nazi takeover began as a German citizen and then discovered that legal citizenship was worthless to one who did not belong to the national community of blood and soil. The conclusion many Jews drew from this experience, however, was quite different from hers. Having seen that those who did not belong to the German *Volksgemeinschaft* ceased to have any rights as citizens, even the right to life, they came naturally to the Zionist belief that citizen rights and ethnic community are inseparable, and that only in their own national state could they be secure.

Arendt did not draw that conclusion, and accused many Zionists of uncritically adopting 'German-inspired nationalism'.¹⁸⁷ No doubt it was comparatively easy for her to resist the temptation to identify political citizenship with ethnic or religious community because her own membership of the Jewish community was somewhat ambiguous. Given the reality of Nazi persecution she felt that she had no alternative but to identify

¹⁸⁷ 'Zionism Reconsidered' (1944) in *The Jew as Pariah* 156. For a detailed account of Arendt's critical writings on Zionism, see D. Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 72-134.

herself as a Jew,¹⁸⁸ and having made this identification she took a passionate interest in Jewish history and politics. Had it not been for Nazism, however, there can be little doubt that, coming as she did from a largely assimilated background, her Jewish birth would have meant less to her than her German culture.¹⁸⁹ Like Rahel Varnhagen, whose struggles with Jewishness interested her so deeply, she was able to accept and be grateful for an identity that was beyond her control,¹⁹⁰ but that was a different matter from communal belonging. When her book on Eichmann upset her fellow Jews, and Gershom Scholem pointed out to her that what particularly offended them was the book's heartless tone, so lacking in 'love of the Jewish people', she answered that she had never felt such 'love' for the Jews or for any other collective group, and that love was a matter between persons, best kept out of politics.¹⁹¹ After being denied membership of the German nation, Arendt found in America a refuge not only from persecution but also from pressures toward communal togetherness in politics. She discovered with great relief that the United States was not a nation-state in the European sense of linking political unity with national homogeneity. In that country, with its many different ethnic groups held together by a Constitution that predated the great age of nationalism, it was possible to enjoy 'the freedom of becoming a citizen without having to pay the price of assimilation'.¹⁹² Not only could one be a citizen without being a bourgeois, one could also avoid any all-embracing *national* identification. Among Italian Americans, Polish Americans, Irish Americans and all the rest, being a Jewish American was not problematic in the way that being a Jewish German had been. In spite of the unresolved racial problem, America's success in reconciling ethnic diversity with equal citizenship seemed to show that there was a realistic alternative to the nation-state.¹⁹³

Although there can be no doubt that Arendt's own experience pointed her thoughts toward a non-communal conception of citizenship, her position was also supported by a highly critical analysis of nationalism as a political force. In *Totalitarianism*, as we have seen, she identified two

¹⁸⁸ E. Young-Bruhl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982) 109; 'On Humanity in Dark Times', 18.

¹⁸⁹ See J.N. Shklar's bitter but revealing 'Hannah Arendt as Pariah', *Partisan Review* 50/1 (1983) 64–77. On Arendt's sometimes startling attitude to other Jews, see A. Kazin, *New York Jew* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1978) 203, 218. Cf. D. Barley, 'Hannah Arendt: Die Judenfrage', *Zeitschrift für Politik* 35/2 (1988) 113–29.

¹⁹⁰ *Rahel Varnhagen: the Life of a Jewish Woman* (San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) 227: "'Eichmann in Jerusalem': an Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt", *Encounter* (January 1964) 53. Near the end of her life, Arendt remarked in a speech that she 'never had wished to belong, not even in Germany' ('Sonning Prize Speech', 1975, MSS Box 70 013981).

¹⁹¹ 'Letters between Scholem and Arendt', 51, 54.

¹⁹² 'Sonning Prize Speech' 013980. ¹⁹³ Cf. Botstein, 'Liberating the Pariah' 89–93.

different kinds of nationalism, distinguishing the comparatively civilised kind characteristic of established nation-states like France from the 'tribal nationalism' of discontented groups inside the empires of Eastern Europe. This 'tribal nationalism', which seemed to her to provide a basis for mobilising uprooted masses and to be a direct ancestor of Nazi ideology, was akin to racism because it assumed that national character and identity were inborn and determined. A Pole was a Pole or a German a German simply by inheriting a particular kind of 'soul', regardless of whether he belonged to a visible community or had a particular cultural heritage.¹⁹⁴

'Tribal nationalism' of this kind was a very different matter from the sense of nationhood characteristic of the mature nation-states of Western Europe, but even a genuine nation like France, which really was a people sharing responsibility for a common world built by their ancestors, could not escape the contradictions contained in the ideal of the nation-state. These contradictions had appeared at the nation-state's birth, 'when the French Revolution combined the declaration of the Rights of Man with the demand for national sovereignty'.¹⁹⁵ In the twentieth century, as ethnic minorities found themselves second-class citizens, refugees or even inmates of death camps, the depth of the problem became apparent. In order to enjoy what are, ironically, called 'human rights', a person must be a citizen of a state: but if the available states are *nation-states*, large and ever-growing minorities find themselves excluded from citizenship, and thereby denied human rights.¹⁹⁶

Not only did Arendt come to the conclusion that the nation-state at its best creates more political problems than it solves; less plausibly, she decided in the 1940s that its day was over, and that the future lay with non-national political forms, whether federations or empires.¹⁹⁷ In the decade that saw the collapse and division of France in the face of Nazism, the establishment of a Soviet empire in Eastern Europe and the post-war moves in the West toward European unity, this expectation was not altogether unreasonable. To persist in this view, as she did, while nationalism revived in Europe and spread around the world¹⁹⁸ shows a capacity to ignore unwelcome evidence that belies her resolution to look reality in the face. Curiously enough, this did not prevent her from noticing that the power of national loyalties in politics had also been underestimated by Rosa Luxemburg, who was (like Arendt), Jewish and multi-lingual and who 'never quite understood the importance of language barriers'.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁴ OTI 226–34. ¹⁹⁵ OTI 230. ¹⁹⁶ OTI 266–98.

¹⁹⁷ 'Zionism Reconsidered' 161; 'Approaches to the "German Problem"', *Partisan Review* 12/1 (Winter 1945) 99–100.

¹⁹⁸ 'Nationalstaat und Demokratie' (1963) MSS Box 68 022815. Cf. Shklar, 'Hannah Arendt as Pariah', 69.

¹⁹⁹ 'Rosa Luxemburg: 1871–1919' (1966) in *Men in Dark Times* 42.

But a more realistic appreciation of the continuing force of nationalism would not have made her any more inclined to accept the nation-state as the model of political legitimacy in the modern world. On the contrary, her vivid apprehension of the danger nationalism posed to minority rights would have impelled her to campaign more strongly against it, as she did in the case of Israel. The building of a Jewish homeland in Palestine was a vindication of the human capacity for new beginnings which she watched with intense and highly critical interest, trying without success to influence the political actors involved.²⁰⁰ The improbability of the entire Zionist enterprise, including the ‘artificiality’ of Jewish settlement in Palestine, which seemed so offensive to what she called ‘a generation brought up on the blind faith in necessity’, seemed to her in fact to underline its ‘human significance’.²⁰¹ Her enthusiasm did not extend, however, to the Zionist drive for a sovereign Jewish nation-state modelled on the pre-war states of Europe. She argued during the war that the refuge which had been built in Palestine by Jewish immigrants could be preserved intact only through cooperation between Jews and Arabs. If the Jews were to fight their Arab neighbours and win (which seemed, at the time, very unlikely) the results would be self-destructive. ‘The “victorious” Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defence to a degree that would submerge all other interests and activities.’²⁰² What was needed for political legitimacy was not national unity but equal citizenship, as in the USA.

Arendt’s lack of enthusiasm for community on a national scale was complemented by an equal distaste for smaller-scale fraternity. This sets her apart from many of those who thought in the 1960s and 70s that they were her followers. Her own enthusiasm for active citizenship and participation in politics is quite different in tone from much of the participationist literature of that time, which was inspired by a romantic desire for community, for warmth, authenticity and naturalness. Nothing could be less Arendtian than this longing for small fraternities in which one could drop one’s mask, communicate totally with other people, be spontaneous and let it all hang out. Richard Sennett expressed a view very similar to Arendt’s when, in his attack on this movement, he criticised the modern ‘ideology of intimacy’ and said that ‘warmth is our god’. Sennett contrasts this modern craving for warmth with eighteenth-century ideals of urbanity, formality and dignity, typified by eighteenth-century townscapes where

²⁰⁰ See the writings collected in *The Jew as Pariah*, Ron Feldman’s introduction is excellent. See also Barnouw, *Visible Spaces* 101–34.

²⁰¹ ‘Peace or Armistice in the Near East?’ (1950), *The Jew as Pariah* 206.

²⁰² ‘To Save the Jewish Homeland’ 187. Cf. Botstein, ‘Liberating the Pariah’ 86–8.

strangers could meet in relations of civility rather than intimacy,²⁰³ and this is very much Arendt's view also. While greatly valuing warmth, intimacy and naturalness in private life, she insisted on the importance of a formal, artificial, public realm in which the natural ties of kinship and intimacy were set aside in favour of deliberate, impartial solidarity with other citizens; in which people's actions mattered more than their sentiments; in which there was enough space between people for them to stand back and judge one another coolly and objectively.

Although this theme recurs throughout her writings, and is particularly prominent in *On Revolution*, her most explicit treatment of it comes in the address 'On Humanity in Dark Times' which she gave when she was awarded the Lessing Prize in 1959. She admitted there that in 'dark times' like the years under Nazism, when there is no public realm to illuminate the world, or among a people such as the Jews who are kept out of the public realm, a specially warm humanity may develop as people 'move closer to one another, to seek in the warmth of intimacy the substitute for that light and illumination which only the public realm can cast'. This warm humanity is, however, bought at the price of 'worldlessness', which 'is always a form of barbarism'.²⁰⁴ The danger of cultivating warmth and intimacy above all else is that one loses the civilised public values, such as objectivity, which grow only among people who have space between them and who meet on cooler terms in the public realm.

Arendt's concept of a republic of citizens held together by a shared public world in which there is space for their plurality to appear is also very different from the ideal of the classical republican tradition, which was communitarian to the point of being stifling. Like Hegel, Arendt tries to articulate an understanding of politics in which unity and plurality are dialectically combined, and, as with Hegel, what synthesises the opposed moments of the dialectic is the concrete world of political institutions. There the resemblance ends, however, for Arendt never suggests that the public worlds that human beings can form, inhabit and pass on to future generations are manifestations of Reason. On the contrary, far from being rational or necessary they are highly contingent affairs, born of the specific actions and agreements of particular men and dependent on continuing support for their survival.²⁰⁵ Thinking about republics, Arendt was always finely balanced between pessimism about the capacity of human beings to establish 'lasting institutions',²⁰⁶ and optimism at the thought that each new member of the human race is, after all, capable of joining with others to

²⁰³ R. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977) 4–13, 255–9. ²⁰⁴ 'On Humanity in Dark Times' 30, 13.

²⁰⁵ Benjamin Barber's position is very close to Arendt's on this subject (*Strong Democracy* xv, 133, 152, 219) ²⁰⁶ OR 84.

make a new beginning amid the ruins of the old. A few years after the failed revolution in Hungary she expressed these mixed feelings thus: 'Revolution and Freedom seem to me to sum up about all we can see of an uncertain and flickering ray of hope in the otherwise rather dark and threatening prospects of the future.'²⁰⁷

Revolution and tragedy

The material for this chapter's survey of Arendt's version of republicanism has been drawn from many of her essays and manuscripts, but above all from *On Revolution*, which is her most republican book. It is also (in the absence of her projected 'Introduction into Politics') the nearest she got to a comprehensive statement of her thinking about politics as such, as distinct from her reflection in *The Human Condition* on the human context of politics. This is not to suggest for a moment that *On Revolution* could be regarded either as a systematic work of political philosophy or as a programme for political action. The book is neither of these, but is instead a meditation on revolution that brings together a set of interconnected themes and problems that Arendt had been turning over in her mind for many years, but which were given stimulus by the events in Hungary in 1956, and given form by being linked to the contrasted experiences of the American and French Revolutions.²⁰⁸ Like the essays in *Between Past and Future*, *On Revolution* is a series of interrelated 'exercises in political thought'²⁰⁹ in which Arendt makes distinctions, poses questions, identifies problems but does not feel obliged to solve them. Like *Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, but perhaps to an even greater extent, the book is a symphonic composition of interwoven themes rather than an argument. Most of these themes have been explored in the course of our examination of Arendt's thought: for example, her interpretation of modernity as a surrender to the 'unnatural growth of the natural', and its counterpart, the reassertion of the human capacity to resist necessity and start afresh; her meditations on the tensions between morality and politics, and on the dangers of trying to conduct public life on the basis of private emotions; her fear that authentic political experiences had been distorted by the tradition of political philosophy and her attempt to articulate them in a more adequate conceptual form.

One theme that is particularly characteristic of *On Revolution* can in retrospect be heard echoing throughout Arendt's writings on politics. Karl

²⁰⁷ 'Revolution and Freedom' 578.

²⁰⁸ Cf. J. Miller, 'The Pathos of Novelty: Hannah Arendt's Image of Freedom in the Modern World' in Hill, *Hannah Arendt* 177–208.

²⁰⁹ 'Preface: the Gap Between Past and Future' 14.

Jaspers, to whom she dedicated the book, recognised it immediately, to her delight. She had, he said, presented a vision of tragedy but not of despair, and she responded that this had been precisely her intention.²¹⁰ At the heart of *On Revolution*, in other words, is the tragic vision of humanity that we glimpsed in *Totalitarianism* and saw more fully articulated in *The Human Condition*, a vision of the narrow path open to humanity between the inexorable forces of nature and the avalanches men themselves are liable to set off when they use their freedom. Arendt lays great stress on the pathos of revolution, and particularly on the brief period of freedom that intervened between the endless cyclic repetition conjured up by the word 'revolution' itself and the uncontrollable forces that the French Revolution set in motion.

It tells us a lot about the way in which she wound her reflections around historical events that the symbolic force of the French Revolution in *On Revolution* is the exact opposite of what it had meant for her in *Totalitarianism*. In her earlier writings it had been a symbol of humanism, of the human ability to stand against the processes of nature and to build a human world.²¹¹ By the time she came to write *On Revolution*, after her reflections on Marx, labour and the life process, the same revolution represented to her the uncontrollable torrent that engulfed revolutionaries and defeated human efforts, so that 'it seemed as though a force greater than men had interfered when men began to assert their grandeur and to vindicate their honor'.²¹² The constant in both sets of reflections was the contrast between heroic human beings and the overwhelming forces against which they were pitted. In the later book it is the American Founding Fathers who become the heroes of humanism, contrasted with the Jacobins' fateful surrender to the forces of nature. Behind them, in Arendt's humanist imagery, stand the Pilgrim Fathers, cast up in a hostile wilderness and managing by the sheer power of mutual trust to build a human world that could keep nature and barbarism at bay.²¹³

For Arendt, therefore, revolution is above all the stage upon which are displayed the heroism and tragedy inherent in the whole project of human civilisation. On the one hand, it is the *locus classicus* in modern times of political freedom: of the human capacity to break with the past and to act together to bring something new into existence, as the American revolutionaries had so notably done in founding the Republic. On the other hand, as the French and subsequent revolutions had shown, the most likely effect of any such attempt to assert man's capacity for freedom was a brutal

²¹⁰ Jaspers to Arendt, 16 May 1963, Arendt to Jaspers, 29 May 1963, *Briefwechsel* 540–3.

²¹¹ *OT* 144.

²¹² *OR* 49.

²¹³ *OR* 167, 173. Arendt makes the Pilgrim Fathers sound remarkably existentialist and not at all religious.

reminder of our subjection to necessity. Further aspects of the tragic dimension of human existence emerged through the experience of the French Revolution. One of them was that civilisation itself, including all known examples of political freedom, had always been founded upon violence and exploitation; another that, when that appalling truth forced itself upon the revolutionaries in France, their high-minded efforts to establish social justice led only to further tragedy, the wreckage of freedom in the Terror.

Does the experience of revolution offer any relief from tragedy? The habitual connection between revolution and violence, on which Arendt reflects throughout *On Revolution*, suggests not. As we have seen, she finds hope in her interpretation of American experience that political freedom for some may on occasion be had without exploitation of others, and that heroic politics need not be violent, but can be a matter of agreement and mutual trust. To suppose that this might ever be *easy*, however, would be quite contrary to her essentially tragic view of the human situation. Even under the most favourable circumstances, when (as in America) human beings do succeed in establishing a stronghold of human freedom in the wilderness, it is only with the greatest difficulty that it can be preserved and passed on to later generations. Given the odds against them, human beings are scarcely likely to succeed; the best they are likely to be able to do is to fail gloriously as the Hungarians had done, leaving behind them an everlasting name.²¹⁴

In view of the circumstances in which Arendt first began to think about politics, it is scarcely surprising that her political writings are pervaded by the sense that the human situation is a tragic one, promising disaster and demanding heroism. As we have seen, this mood harmonised very well with the classical republicans whom she could to some extent regard as spiritual ancestors. It does create problems for her readers, however, most of whom see human life not at all tragically but with what Arendt would certainly consider to be a hubristic confidence in the capacity of political actors to solve the problems of humanity. This instinctive optimism leads many of her readers to suppose that the purpose of her writings is to recommend a participatory utopia. In fact, however, for all her stress on the human capacity for action, the tone of her writings is not at all activist, and her 'new republicanism' should not be regarded as a blueprint for politics. As she made clear on a number of occasions, her own perspective was the

²¹⁴ Reporting the story (told at Eichmann's trial) of a sergeant in the German army who had helped Jews until he was caught and executed, Arendt remarked, 'how utterly different everything would be today . . . if only more such stories could have been told', since they showed that *some* people will stand against terror. 'Humanly speaking, no more is required . . . for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation' (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 210–12).

backward-looking one which seeks to understand, to judge and to celebrate rather than to produce an effect.²¹⁵

Together with her strong sense of the tragic situation of humanity and the enormous obstacles to success in human affairs, other aspects of her outlook deterred her from offering the kind of political theory that is intended to guide practice. One of these was her understanding of action itself, since once this is distinguished from making and understood as something that goes on among plural beings who are all capable of initiatives, the idea of starting with a political blueprint and putting it into practice becomes preposterous. But another decisive factor was that the relation between thought and action, and especially the uneasy relations between philosophy and politics, were themselves matters of which she was acutely conscious and on which she reflected over many years. We have encountered this strand in her thinking again and again, and it is now time to gather its threads together.

²¹⁵ 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' 303–10. My own previous book on Arendt is open to this objection.

7 Philosophy and politics¹

Philosophy versus politics

Hannah Arendt liked to say that thinking is an endless process that produces no settled results and is 'like Penelope's web, it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before'.² In general, this description of intellectual life does not fit Arendt herself very well, since, as we have seen, her reflections did produce results in the shape of a complex network of concepts and distinctions which she developed and constantly reused. But there is one train of thought running through her work that really does have the shifting, unstable character that the metaphor of Penelope's web suggests, and through which we can perhaps eavesdrop on that never-ending internal dialogue of the thinker with herself that Arendt took to be the essence of philosophy. The subject of this debate, and one of her major preoccupations, was the relation between thought and action, philosophy and politics.³

The sources of her concern with this topic lay in her own experiences following Hitler's rise to power. Formerly a student of philosophy with little interest in politics, she was catapulted into concern with public affairs by the shock of Nazism. Only by way of political theory did she eventually find her way back to philosophy proper. Evidence that this was indeed a homecoming can be found in a remark to an old friend after she had been invited to give the Gifford Lectures that became *The Life of the Mind*. She told Hans Jonas that she felt she had done her bit in politics, and from now on was going to stick to philosophy.⁴ In the last year of her life, indeed, she went so far as to declare publicly that for all her praise of the public realm

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990).

² *The Life of the Mind* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1978) (referred to below as *L of M* vol. I, *Thinking* 88).

³ The interpretation presented here runs counter to Agnes Heller's claim that Arendt was 'attempting to construct a philosophical system' (A. Heller, 'Hannah Arendt on the "Vita Contemplativa"' in G.T. Kaplan and C.S. Kessler, *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1989) 152).

⁴ H. Jonas, 'Acting, Knowing, Thinking: Gleanings from Hannah Arendt's Philosophical Work', *Social Research* 44/1 (1977) 27.

she herself was not a political animal, and that her early decision to study philosophy had 'implied already, even though I may not have known it, a non-commitment to the public'. For, as she added, 'Philosophy is a solitary business.'⁵

If her own life as philosopher and citizen suggested a certain tension between thought and action, another personal experience forced on her attention the possibility of a much starker opposition between them. In 1933, when Arendt and her fellow-Jews were exiles or in danger, Martin Heidegger, her former teacher and lover and the man who had represented for her the summit of philosophical thinking, allied himself publicly with the Nazis.⁶ As Arendt afterwards remarked of that period, 'the problem . . . was not what our enemies might be doing, but what our friends were doing'.⁷ The experience brought home to her the unpalatable fact that Heidegger was not the only great philosopher to have had a taste for tyranny. Exceedingly few distinguished thinkers had ever sympathised with the kind of republican political action she now valued so highly, and Plato, the founder of Western political philosophy, had been even more hostile to democracy than Heidegger. Could it be, she came to ask herself, that there is some incompatibility between philosophy and politics built into the nature of each activity?

It is in the writings of her last twenty-five years that this preoccupation comes to the surface. Before then, her way of accounting for Heidegger's Nazism and solving the problem of philosophy versus politics as far as he was concerned seems to have been to devalue his philosophy towards the level of his politics. In an essay on German 'Existenz Philosophy' published in the *Partisan Review* in 1946⁸ she gave a hostile and slighting account of Heidegger, comparing his philosophy unfavourably with that of Karl Jaspers, her other teacher, who had always opposed Nazism. Although the article does not explicitly discuss political philosophy, there are obvious political overtones in Arendt's claim that Heidegger's philosophy is characterised by 'egoism', in contrast to the stress upon communication and openness towards others in Jaspers' thought. Furthermore, she suggests that the latter was not only more humane but also more philosophically advanced than Heidegger's. Apparently Jaspers, who had behaved so much better politically, was also the better philosopher, so that philosophy and politics seemed to be in harmony.⁹

⁵ 'Sonning Prize Speech' (1975) MSS Box 70 013985-6.

⁶ For an elaborate investigation of this controversial subject, see V. Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, trans. P. Burrell and G. Ricci (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989).

⁷ E. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982) 108.

⁸ 'What is Existenz Philosophy?' *Partisan Review* 13/1 (Winter 1946) 46-56.

⁹ On Arendt and Jaspers, see L.P. and S.K. Hinchman, 'Existentialism Politicized: Arendt's Debt to Jaspers', *Review of Politics* 53/3 (1991) 435-68.

We cannot tell how far this position satisfied her at the time. All that is certain is that within a few years of the publication of the essay on 'Existenz Philosophy' she came to see things very differently. Her bitterness against Heidegger did not survive reunion with him during her visit to Europe in 1949–50.¹⁰ Avidly reading his later writings, she once more saw him as the transcendent philosophical genius of the time¹¹ and was consequently faced once more with the problem of how such profundity in philosophy could coexist with such stupidity or perversity in politics.

For the rest of her life she reflected upon the relation between philosophy and politics¹² and, more broadly, between thought and action, and her reflections led her in two different directions. They led in the first place towards what she would consider one of her major discoveries in political theory, but they also directed her towards a train of thought that was less obviously fruitful, though fascinating. It is with this second, ultimately unresolved train of thought that this chapter will be chiefly concerned. First, though, let us take note that her sensitivity to the uneasy relations between philosophy and politics was one of the factors that led her to the claim that most of the 'great tradition' of Western political philosophy from Plato onward had given a systematically misleading impression of the nature and potentialities of politics. Although, as we have seen, she turned to reflections on that tradition in order to clarify Marx's relations to totalitarianism, her manuscripts from the early 1950s make clear that she was already thinking about age-old tensions between philosophy and politics. For whereas philosophy in general originally arose, she believed, from 'wonder' at the phenomena of the world,¹³ political philosophy was

¹⁰ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 246. Cf. Arendt to Jaspers, 6 July 1946, 29 September 1949, 4 March 1951 in *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, ed. L. Köhler and H. Saner (Munich, Piper, 1985) 84, 178, 204.

¹¹ 'Martin Heidegger at Eighty' (1971) in M. Murray (ed.), *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978) 293–303. Cf. L.P. and S.K. Hinchman, 'In Heidegger's Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Phenomenological Humanism', *Review of Politics* 46 (April 1984) 183–211.

¹² Two quite different lecture courses on this topic survive among Arendt's manuscripts: 'Philosophy and Politics: The Problem of Action and Thought after the French Revolution' (1954) MSS Box 69, and 'Philosophy and Politics: What is Political Philosophy?' (1969) Box 40. The final section of the 1954 course has been edited by J. Kohn and published in *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990) 73–103. See also Arendt to Gertrud and Karl Jaspers, 25 December 1950, *Briefwechsel* 196; Arendt to Kenneth Thompson, 31 March 1969, Correspondence with the Rockefeller Foundation, MSS Box 20 013824. The relation between politics and the life of the mind is the subject of a book by Leah Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking: the Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1989). Bradshaw's claim (pp. 7, 68, 100) is that there is a 'dramatic reversal' in Arendt's thought on these matters, a 'radical break' between her earlier 'political' works and her later preoccupation with the life of the mind. Arendt's manuscripts (to which Bradshaw does not refer) do not support this interpretation.

¹³ *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958) 302. This edition is referred to below as *HC*.

always the 'stepchild' of philosophy,¹⁴ never popular with its grudging parent. Ever since the condemnation of Socrates by the Athenian democrats, which provoked Plato to dream of making the city safe for philosophers by giving them power, political philosophy had been based less on the authentically political experience of acting among others than on the experience of the philosopher, who thinks in solitude and then has to cope with an uncomprehending world when he emerges from his reflections. Political philosophy, in other words, has looked at politics from the philosopher's point of view, not from that of the political actor.

According to Arendt this had a number of unfortunate results. Politics was downgraded and lost its dignity. The immortality for which Greek citizens strove could not compete with the eternity to which philosophy gave access, and which cast all aspects of the *vita activa* into such disrepute that action became confused with other activities. From the philosopher's point of view, politics could be only a means to an end, not something good in itself. It was therefore easily misinterpreted as a form of fabrication, best directed by a ruler who understands the end to be achieved. The notion of a single ruler rather than a plurality of actors was naturally congenial to philosophers who were looking for a single truth to override plural opinions. Politically, the great disadvantage of this point of view was that it implied a loss of understanding of human plurality and of man's capacity to initiate action. But philosophers were not much concerned with freedom of action. Possessing the truth, they sought not to persuade the masses but to compel them, either by threatening them with divine punishment or by means of a more professional form of intellectual coercion, forcing them along a narrow track of deductive reasoning.¹⁵ Meanwhile, they gave the *coup de grâce* to an authentic understanding of politics by capturing the crucial notion of freedom, which they reinterpreted to mean a private or internal condition rather than freedom to move and act in the public world.¹⁶

Socrates versus Plato

Arendt's account of the way in which traditional Western understandings of politics have been distorted by philosophical preoccupations is not something that she changed her mind about. Once her reflections on the relations between philosophy and politics had directed her attention to it,

¹⁴ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954)023358. Cf. 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS, c. 1952-3) Box 69, 19-23; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought' (1st draft, 1953) Box 64, 36-end.

¹⁵ 'What is Authority?', *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, Viking Press, 1968) 107-11.

¹⁶ 'What is Freedom?', *Between Past and Future* 145, 157; See also B. Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 1981) chs. 1-2.

she did not significantly alter her position. But those reflections led her also to a series of questions that were less easily answered, and on which she continued to meditate for the rest of her life, trying out different answers without finding definite solutions. How deep does the tension between philosophy and politics go? Has it been essentially an unfortunate accident which arose out of the specific events of Socrates' death and was perpetuated by historical contingencies, but which we can put behind us now that the tradition is broken? Or does it go deeper than that? Do thought and action possess inherent characteristics that make tensions between philosophy and politics inevitable? Is philosophy a search for absolute truth and iron consistency that gives the philosopher a natural sympathy with coercion and tyranny? Or is the thinking in which the philosopher engages an activity that is as free and unproductive of results as action itself? Is philosophical thinking an inherently solitary, anti-pluralist activity that is possible only in withdrawal from the world, as the examples of Plato and Heidegger suggest? Or, on the contrary (as we might conclude from looking at Socrates or Jaspers), does philosophy at its best actually *need* contact with others in a public world, and imply the recognition of plurality and communication with others? And supposing that philosophical thinking does involve a withdrawal from the world, must this standing back destroy common sense and disqualify the philosopher for politics, or might it actually guard him against thoughtless evil and free his capacity for political judgement?

During the last twenty-five years of Arendt's life reflections upon this knot of questions appear continually in her published and unpublished writings, but it is possible to identify two overlapping phases of her thought: one in the early 1950s, perhaps connected with her reunion with Heidegger; the other, later phase linked with the trial of Eichmann and the controversy that followed her book about it.

Whether or not her earlier phase of reflections on this subject was connected with Heidegger, it was undoubtedly linked to Marx. When, in the course of her work on the 'totalitarian elements of Marxism', she set about relating Marx to the great tradition of Western thought,¹⁷ a vast and uncharted field of reflection opened before her. Her published and unpublished writings from the early 1950s reveal a bewildering number of connected thought trains, but one of the key points on which they tend to converge is the trial of Socrates and its implications for Western philosophy and politics.¹⁸ In her manuscripts of the time, indeed, it is possible to find

¹⁷ In 1953 Arendt delivered a course of lectures entitled 'Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Thought'. Two very different manuscript versions remain, and it is the preliminary draft that is particularly relevant to the matters discussed here.

¹⁸ e.g. 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023394–8 (*Social Research* (1990) 73–9). Cf. Arendt to Jaspers, 1 July 1956 *Briefwechsel* 325–6.

sketches for a kind of myth of a philosophical Fall – a story which she evidently found tempting, although not entirely convincing.

The story goes like this. In the days of the early Greek polis, before academic philosophy had been invented, the citizens of Athens lived a life in which thought and action were united. This primordial unity was symbolised by the word *logos*, which meant speech as well as thought. Greek politics was conducted through this *logos*, and the significance of this went beyond the fact that action within the polis was carried on by means of persuasion rather than force. It also meant that in the citizens' endless talk, action disclosed thought, while thought itself informed the actions of the citizens as they persuaded one another.¹⁹ Within the public realm that formed between the citizens, reality could appear and be seen from all sides,²⁰ while within this kind of politics, based on speech and uniting thought and action, the plurality and freedom of men had full play. By contrast, once action and thought were separated from one another, each tended to degenerate into coercion that denied that plurality and freedom, action by degenerating into speechless violence, and thought into a kind of single-track logical reasoning that was no less hostile to human plurality and spontaneity.

It was from this Athenian politics of public speech that (according to Arendt) Socrates' version of philosophical thinking grew. For this was a kind of thinking that was not divorced from or opposed to politics, but was itself a matter of moving amongst others in the public world and exploring their opinions. Each person has his own opinion, his *doxa*, which represents the way the world appears to him, so that there are as many opinions as there are separate persons looking at the common world from different points of view. But whereas Plato would later aspire to replace these plural opinions with a single truth, Socrates had no such intention. All he was trying to do was to encourage each person to speak his own opinion coherently. '*Maeutics* to Socrates was a political activity, a give and take, fundamentally on a basis of strict equality, whose fruits could not be measured by results, arriving at this or that general truth.'²¹ Far from aiming to discover an authoritative truth that would bring discussion to a conclusion, Socrates evidently regarded talking among friends about the world they had in common as an activity that was worthwhile in itself: 'Socrates seems to have believed that the political function of the philosopher is to help establish this kind of common world, built on the understanding of friendship, where no rulership is needed.'²²

¹⁹ 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 11–13; 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023361–6; HC 27.

²⁰ Cf. 'Einleitung: der Sinn von Politik' (c. 1957) MSS Box 60, 010, 13.

²¹ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023400–1 (*Social Research* (1990) 81); Cf. 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 30–1.

²² 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023403 (*Social Research* (1990) 84).

It seems, then, that there was a time when thought and action, philosophy and politics were not separated or opposed. Arendt explicitly states that these modern distinctions are not a matter of course,²³ but are the results of events, above all the result of Socrates' death. For the fate of Socrates not only drove Plato into enmity to politics: it also made him doubt his teacher's whole philosophical approach. In the light of Socrates' trial, the futility of talking to the masses was obvious. Instead of trying to persuade them, Plato opposed to their opinions the absolute truth which appears only in the solitude of philosophical thinking, and which must then be imposed upon others, whether they are coerced by the force of logic or by threats of divine punishment in a life to come.²⁴

The life of the citizen versus the life of the mind

Tragic as this story of philosophy's Fall may appear, its implication is that the opposition between thought and action that has plagued Western traditions is not inevitable. If Socrates had not been condemned; if he had not had a disciple of Plato's genius to react to his death; if the Greek polis had not already begun a decline that favoured the pretensions of the philosophers; if Christianity had not reinforced the hierarchy of thought and action; in short, if circumstances had been otherwise, apparently, philosophy and politics need never have been divided. Some of Arendt's observations on Aristotle seem at first sight to point in the same direction, for she frequently states that his political philosophy was explicitly anti-Platonist and that he articulated some of the fundamental experiences of the Greek polis. Unlike Plato, for example, Aristotle did appreciate the dignity of the active life, the link between freedom and political speech, and the difference between the wisdom of the philosopher and the specifically political understanding of the statesman.²⁵ If one links together Arendt's reflections on Socrates and Aristotle with some of the observations she later makes about political thinking as practised by philosophers like Jaspers and Kant (which we will examine later) one can produce a plausible interpretation of her position as straightforwardly anti-Platonist, implying that philosophy and politics had been in harmony once and could be again, in spite of all the traditional distortions.

Arendt's position is by no means as simple as that, however: in fact it is not simple at all. It is not so much a position as an internal dialogue, continually going back and forth between alternative standpoints. Even in

²³ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023366.

²⁴ 'What is Authority?', 107–16; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 29–30, 33–4; 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023395–9 (*Social Research* (1990) 73–80).

²⁵ 'What is Authority?' 116; 'Karl Marx and the Tradition' (1st draft) 12–13; 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023362–3, 023370, 023401.

the early manuscript lectures on 'Philosophy and Politics' that describe the Socratic state of grace from which Plato and subsequent philosophy fell, she admitted that there were other and more fundamental reasons for the uneasy relations between philosophy and politics. These deeper tensions showed themselves even in the case of Socrates and in spite of the fact that he was a thoroughly *political* philosopher. For although Socrates did not claim to be an expert in possession of a special philosophical truth, he was different from other citizens because he *was* overwhelmingly concerned with truth in the sense of trying to make every person he talked with speak his opinion more coherently. Inevitably, this search for truth tended to have a corrosive effect on opinions, undermining them without putting anything in their place.²⁶ And if a latent conflict between loyalty to the polis and loyalty to the truth can be found even in Socrates, in Plato's case the tension was intensified and given theoretical expression.

Arendt suggests that Plato's anti-political utopia represented an attempt to resolve a conflict that would have been present even without the trial of Socrates, namely a conflict within the philosopher himself between two kinds of experience, the life of the citizen and the life of the mind. Once philosophers had discovered a realm of thought which they could inhabit in sublime detachment from their earthly location, their appreciation of the latter and their sense of responsibility for it was bound to be affected. Even Aristotle, who did not share Plato's personal hostility to the polis, took for granted the superiority of philosophic contemplation over action, and thereby in effect devalued politics to the level of an instrumental activity.²⁷ For Plato, the clash between the two orders of experience became a conflict between the body and the soul, which the soul must win if it is to be free. The soul must rule over its body as a free citizen rules over his slaves, and this internal domination in its turn becomes for Plato the model for rule over the citizens by philosopher-kings. As the analogy reminds us, Arendt was aware of another reason why the tempting picture of thought and action united in the polis could not be altogether sustained. At several points in these early manuscripts she admits that the institution of slave-owning had already opened a gulf between 'knowing' and 'doing' in practical affairs, and placed the experience of rulership at the base of Greek politics.²⁸

²⁶ 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023408 (*Social Research* (1990) 90–1).

²⁷ 'What is Authority?' 115–18; *HC* 196, 230; 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023402 (*Social Research* (1990) 83). See also *L of M I* 199.

²⁸ e.g. 'Philosophy and Politics' (1954) 023368–9. For another indication that Arendt's views on this matter were far from settled, see an aside in her notes for 'Lectures on the History of Political Theory' at the University of California in 1955 (MSS Box 41 024084), where she says that 'ancient philosophy . . . speaks out of the polis-experience', and pays little attention to action because polis-life, unlike earlier Greek experience, did *not* encourage action. See the discussion of 'action' in chapter 4 above.

However tempted she might have been, therefore, by the image of an original Socratic harmony between philosophical thought and political action, she acknowledged from the first that there may be something in the activity of thinking that makes philosophers typically unsympathetic to free political action and inclined to favour tyranny. Even before she wrote the manuscript lectures on 'Philosophy and Politics' that we have been looking at, she had already reflected upon a possible link between philosophy and totalitarianism. The link between the two is the process of logical deduction, and Arendt makes the connection in some manuscript reflections on totalitarianism that appear to belong to the same thought train as her essay on 'Ideology and Terror', which contains reflections on the logicity of totalitarian ideologies and the appeal of this iron consistency to lonely mass-men.²⁹ In the manuscript, as in 'Ideology and Terror', Arendt goes on to distinguish between this forlorn 'loneliness' and the condition of 'solitude' in which 'we are never alone but together with ourselves'.³⁰ All the same, she says that because solitude is the necessary condition for philosophical thinking, 'philosophers cannot be trusted with politics'.³¹ Not only does their desire for peace in which to think undisturbed give them a bias in favour of strong government; the problem goes deeper than that, for their withdrawal into thought leads them to emphasise solitary experiences at the expense of those that depend on human plurality. Since the political phenomenon that most depends on plurality is power, which is generated by many people acting together,³² one man on his own must either be powerless, or parasitic upon the concerted power of others, like the tyrant. One reason for the historic affinity between philosophers and tyrants, however, is that lonely philosophers have discovered 'that in the human mind itself is apparently something which can force other people and thereby originate power',³³ namely the force of logic. 'Logicity, that is mere reasoning without regard for facts and experience is the true vice of solitude.'³⁴

It is important not to oversimplify Arendt's point here, for she is certainly not equating philosophers with the mass supporters of totalitarianism. The kind of ensnarement to logic that she is talking about is the 'vice of solitude': not its necessary accompaniment, but something that is liable to happen when a man slips from solitude into loneliness. Solitude itself is something that philosophers need not only in order to be together with themselves, but

²⁹ *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 3rd edition (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1967) 472–8.

³⁰ 'Nature of Totalitarianism' (second MS) 19.

³¹ 'Nature of Totalitarianism' (second MS) 19a.

³² Cf. HC 199–203; 'On Violence' (1970) in *Crises of the Republic* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972) 140–55.

³³ 'Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS) 22.

³⁴ 'Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS) 17.

so that they can be 'potentially together with everybody' and ask 'the eternal questions of mankind'.³⁵ The slide from solitude into loneliness and its tyrannical affinities is, in other words, a kind of occupational hazard of philosophy. Although these manuscript reflections suggest that philosophy has political dangers, they seem to imply that support for tyranny represents a deformation of philosophy rather than its natural consequence. Support for this view can be found in the two essays on Karl Jaspers that Arendt published in 1957 and 1958, in which, speaking in tones of warm admiration, she says that, for Jaspers, truth emerges only in communication, so that thinking 'is a kind of practice between men, not a performance of one individual in his self-chosen solitude'.³⁶ Because Jaspers' thought is so closely linked to the world and to other people, it is, Arendt says, 'bound to be political'.³⁷

Reading the two Jaspers essays might leave one with the impression that Jaspers, 'the only philosopher who has ever protested against solitude',³⁸ was to Arendt a model of what philosophy should be. Like the 1946 article on 'Existenz Philosophy', however, these essays need to be read with some caution, remembering the strong personal motives Arendt had for expressing loyalty to her teacher and close friend, particularly in pieces written for celebratory occasions. It may be more significant that qualifications which are to be found in *The Life of the Mind*, written after Jaspers' death, had already occurred to her twenty years previously when she wrote (but did not publish) a lecture on 'Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought'.³⁹ For although she acknowledges in this lecture from 1954 that Jaspers' stress on communication as a central feature of philosophy harks back to 'authentic political experiences', recalling the ancient Greek *logos* which was both thought and speech, she nevertheless expresses some doubts about the political relevance of his philosophy of 'communication'. For communication 'has its roots, not in the public-political sphere, but in the personal encounter of I and Thou, and this relationship of pure dialogue is closer to the original experience of the thinking dialogue in solitude than any other. By the same token, it contains less specifically political experience than almost any relationship in our average everyday lives'.⁴⁰ Twenty years later, in *The Life of the Mind*, she

³⁵ 'Nature of Totalitarianism' (2nd MS) 19a.

³⁶ 'Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?' (1957) in *Men in Dark Times* (London, Cape, 1970) 86. Cf. Hinchman and Hinchman, 'Existentialism Politicized'.

³⁷ 'Karl Jaspers: a Laudatio' (1958) in *Men in Dark Times* 79.

³⁸ 'Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?' 86.

³⁹ Delivered to the American Political Science Association in 1954. Three successive drafts survive (MSS Box 56). References below are to what appears to be the final version, except where indicated. Cf. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt* 281.

⁴⁰ 'Concern with Politics' 023258.

would state categorically, with specific reference to Jaspers, that although under exceptional circumstances the internal dialogue of thought can be extended to include a friend,⁴¹ it cannot provide a paradigm for politics because 'it can never reach the We, the true plural of action'.⁴² Consequently (to return to Arendt's 1954 lecture on politics and European philosophy), Jaspers does not succeed in solving 'the problem which has plagued political philosophy almost throughout its history', which is that philosophy is concerned with man in the singular, politics with men in the plural.⁴³

The most remarkable feature of this 1954 manuscript is the surprising (not to say bizarre) suggestion that the philosopher who may be able to show us the way out of this difficulty is, of all people, Martin Heidegger. The Nazi fellow-traveller whom we have seen Arendt dismissing in her essay on 'Existenz Philosophy' as the philosopher of 'egoism', now appears as a guide to thinking about pluralistic politics. By way of justification for this unlikely accolade, Arendt points to Heidegger's concept of the 'world' (which, as we have seen, formed the basis on which she built her own very different concept), together with the hints of a recognition of human plurality that Heidegger gives by speaking of human beings as 'the mortals' rather than as 'man'. Since Arendt herself admits that 'Heidegger has never articulated the implications of his position',⁴⁴ it seems likely that she was reading her own political philosophy into his writings, revealing what may seem a pathetic eagerness to rescue him from the political company he himself had chosen. The fact that all this is clearer in the first draft of the paper,⁴⁵ and is cut down to a 'hint'⁴⁶ in the final version, suggests a triumph of discretion over inclination which may also explain why the paper remained unpublished. Arendt concluded the paper by drawing up an agenda for a new political philosophy which would reformulate the relation between philosophy and politics, drawing not only upon Heidegger's concept of 'world' and Jaspers' new view of truth but upon the French existentialists' new stress on action. Above all, though, an authentic political philosophy would have to be based on wonder at the realm of human affairs: and Arendt, perhaps beset with doubts about her own qualifications for undertaking the project just described, remarks that

⁴¹ Her long dialogue with Jaspers, in person and by letter, was one of the most important experiences of her post-war years. See *Briefwechsel*; G. Gaus, *Zur Person: Porträts in Frage und Antwort* (Munich, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1965) 29; 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' in M.A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: the Recovery of the Public World* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1979) 338–9.

⁴² *L of M II* 200.

⁴³ 'Concern with Politics' 023258.

⁴⁴ 'Concern with Politics' 023259.

⁴⁵ 'Concern with Politics' (1st draft, marked as such in what appears to be Arendt's handwriting) 14–15.

⁴⁶ 'Concern with Politics' 023259.

philosophers, with their commitment to solitude, 'are not particularly well equipped' for this.⁴⁷

To sum up so far, then, we can find in these early reflections from the 1950s two alternative views of the political implications of philosophy, associated with two pairs of opposed philosophers, Plato versus Socrates and Heidegger versus Jaspers. When Arendt is focussing on Plato or Heidegger she is inclined to fear that philosophy is intrinsically solitary, anti-political and sympathetic to coercion, whereas when she concentrates on Socrates or Jaspers she is tempted to believe that true philosophy may be communicative and in harmony with free politics. No sooner does she formulate either side of the dilemma, however, than she qualifies it and tries to find some way of mediating between the two sides that will allow her to avoid having to choose between them.

Truth and politics

The problem of reconciling philosophy and politics was central to Arendt's enterprise of trying to think afresh about politics. The work of political theory that she planned to write after *The Human Condition* was to have been concerned not only with a re-examination of traditional concepts and a systematic examination of acting in the public realm, but also with 'a discussion of the relation between acting and thinking or between politics and philosophy'.⁴⁸ She never wrote the projected book, but one of the events that diverted her, the trial of Adolf Eichmann, did give added impetus to these reflections. And the very fact that this could be so, that meditations of such a general and abstract kind could emerge out of so specific and concrete an event, was itself an illustration of what seemed to her to be the underlying problem, namely the participation of the thinking person in two distinct and incommensurable realms of experience, life in the world and the life of the mind.

To thousands of Arendt's readers, the questions raised by her treatment of the trial were *political* questions. Whose side was she on? Was she excusing Nazism by describing Eichmann as 'banal'? Was she betraying her community by suggesting that the actions of some Jewish leaders had contributed to the scale of the Holocaust? But although, reluctantly, Arendt felt obliged to make some reply to these accusations,⁴⁹ the questions that really interested her took off from the specific occasion and

⁴⁷ 'Concern with Politics' 023260.

⁴⁸ Proposal for book, 'Introduction into Politics' (probably 1959) Rockefeller Correspondence, MSS Box 20 013872.

⁴⁹ "'Eichmann in Jerusalem": an Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt', *Encounter* (January 1964) 51-6; "'The Formidable Dr Robinson": a Reply', *New York Review of Books* 5/12 (20 January 1966) 26-30.

soared into the rarified atmosphere of reflection. There were two relevant trains of thought, both of which led back to her persistent worry about philosophy and politics. One was about the relation of politics to truth: is it always legitimate to tell the truth, and why had so many lies been told in the course of the controversy?⁵⁰ The other concerned the relation between thinking and morality: was Eichmann's sheer inability to think at the root of his appalling deeds? Let us look first at her essay on 'Truth and Politics'.

Since this essay arose out of the controversy over the Eichmann book, in the course of which Arendt was accused both of falsifying the record and of disloyally revealing what was better concealed, it is not surprising that the political implications of telling the truth about matters of historical fact should be her prime concern, and an eloquent defence of truth-telling and political impartiality her ultimate conclusion. Nevertheless, she connects this with the ancient conflict which she had identified in her earlier manuscript writings between the life of the citizen, who moves among plural opinions, and the life of the philosopher who seeks in solitude for an unchanging truth.⁵¹ These philosophical truth-tellers are not only withdrawn from the world of political opinions, but are constitutionally hostile to it and to the freedom that it represents: 'Truth carries within itself an element of coercion, and the frequently tyrannical tendencies so deplorably obvious among professional truth-tellers may be caused less by a failing of character than by the strain of habitually living under a kind of compulsion.'⁵² In contrast to this solitary submission to the imperatives of philosophical truth, Arendt describes a quite different kind of thinking that is specifically political. This is the deliberation of the citizen, moving among his fellows in the public world, paying attention to their points of view and achieving an 'enlarged mentality' comparable to that which Kant had thought necessary for forming aesthetic judgements.⁵³

Although the Eichmann case evidently intensified Arendt's interest in such matters, the distinction she makes in this essay, between philosophical thinking which is oriented to truth and political thinking which is concerned rather with opinions and judgements, in fact echoes much of what she had said earlier in an essay on Lessing originally published in 1960. On that occasion, pointing out that Lessing positively delighted in the diversity of human opinions and rejoiced that mankind had not been endowed with access to a single, uniform truth, she had praised Lessing's thinking for its freedom and humanity. Thinking, she said, was to him one of the ways of moving freely about among others in the world, and so great had been his commitment to freedom that he had refused to be coerced by

⁵⁰ 'Truth and Politics' (1967), reprinted in *Between Past and Future* with a note on its provenance (p. 227); Gaus, *Zur Person* 26.

⁵¹ 'Truth and Politics' 235. ⁵² 'Truth and Politics' 239. ⁵³ 'Truth and Politics' 241.

truth itself, or even by the demands of consistency.⁵⁴ Instead of pursuing truth, or looking for results from his thinking, he had engaged in unending discourse of a kind that humanises the common world through continual talk about common affairs. Arendt writes of Lessing with great sympathy, and in her reflections on him it is easy to hear echoes of her praise of Jaspers' open and communicative philosophy, as well as reminders of the account of Socrates' political thinking that we have seen her giving in her lectures on 'Philosophy and Politics'. It is important to recognise, therefore, that she explicitly distinguishes the kind of thinking Lessing engaged in from *philosophy*. 'Lessing's thought is not the (Platonic) silent dialogue between me and myself, but an anticipated dialogue with others.'⁵⁵ In other words, as in her essay on 'Truth and Politics', Arendt appears to distinguish between two kinds of thinking, one of which is authentically political because it is oriented toward discourse between citizens with different views of the common world, whereas the other is authentically philosophical because it is solitary and oriented toward truth. Elsewhere, in a convergent train of thought, she distinguished between political 'philosophers' and political 'writers', meaning by the latter people like Machiavelli or Montesquieu who were prompted to write by political experience.⁵⁶

There can be no doubt that Arendt's characterisation of philosophers (as opposed to 'writers') as seekers after absolute, proven truth would have been endorsed by most of the great historical philosophers. One reason for the ambiguity of her position, however, is that Arendt had herself grown up with a very different conception of the task and potentialities of philosophy, namely, Jaspers' vision of a philosophy without results and without proof.⁵⁷ As we have already seen, she suggested in her lecture on 'Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought' that this new and more fluid conception of philosophy might help to bridge the gulf between philosophy and politics. Her own commitment to it can only have been strengthened by the fact that Heidegger in his later writings adopted a similar position. His *magnum opus* of the 1920s, *Being and Time*, had (as Arendt observed),⁵⁸ been startlingly original in content but traditionally systematic in form. By the time she came to write her own *Life of the Mind*, however, it would become possible for her to preface the volume on *Thinking* with an epigraph from Heidegger that surpassed even Jaspers in its modesty:

⁵⁴ 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing', *Men in Dark Times* 8.

⁵⁵ 'On Humanity in Dark Times' 10.

⁵⁶ 'From Machiavelli to Marx' (Course at Cornell University, 1965) MSS Box 39 023453, 023468.

⁵⁷ Hinchman and Hinchman, 'Existentialism Politicized' 437, 463.

⁵⁸ 'What is Existenz Philosophy?' 45.

Thinking does not bring knowledge as do the sciences.
 Thinking does not produce usable practical wisdom.
 Thinking does not solve the riddle of the universe.
 Thinking does not endow us directly with the power to act.⁵⁹

The interest of this for our present purposes is that alongside the distinction she was developing between philosophical and political thinking, Arendt also had available to her another distinction, between two conceptions of philosophy: the traditional conception according to which philosophy aims at true doctrine, and the modern one, common both to Jaspers and the later Heidegger, according to which it is an endless motion that does not produce results. Consequently, in spite of her numerous references to Plato's quest for absolute truth, Arendt's later works contain increasingly explicit claims that this is not something that authentically philosophical thinking can be expected to supply. Already in *The Human Condition* she had distinguished between 'thought', which produces nothing, and 'the great philosophical systems' which 'can hardly be called the results of pure thinking' because their authors had to stop thinking in order to build these structures.⁶⁰ In later writings she spells out the implication that these reified systems misrepresent the authentic thinking of their authors. Since antiquity, she says, 'philosophers have exhibited an annoying inclination toward system-building, and we often have trouble disassembling the constructions they have built when trying to uncover what they really thought'.⁶¹ Elsewhere, in an essay treating Socrates – who taught no doctrine – as the paradigm of the thinker, she suggests that philosophers may have composed their treatises for 'the many, who wish to see results'.⁶² Her final and most complete treatment of the subject, the volume on 'Thinking' in *The Life of the Mind*, claims unequivocally that authentic thinking is and always has been an endless process, which does not produce results, and which is in any case concerned with 'meaning' rather than with 'truth'. The contrary conviction of philosophers from Plato to early Heidegger that philosophy, and their own philosophy in particular, could yield truth, is there diagnosed as a natural mistake arising out of the confusion of 'thinking' with 'knowing', particularly with mathematical certainty. 'Philosophers have always been tempted to accept the criterion of truth – so valid for science and everyday life – as applicable to their own rather extraordinary business as well.'⁶³

⁵⁹ *L of M I 1*. In 'Martin Heidegger at Eighty', looking back with affection and reverence at Heidegger the teacher, Arendt saw him as a 'thinker', exploring pathways of thought that did not lead to conclusions, and expressed doubts whether he could be said to have a 'philosophy' as such (p. 296).

⁶⁰ *HC* 170. ⁶¹ 'Heidegger at Eighty' 298.

⁶² 'Thinking and Moral Considerations: a Lecture', *Social Research* 38/3 (Fall 1971) 426.

⁶³ *L of M I 62*.

The complement of Arendt's growing belief that philosophical thinking cannot supply truth was of course her conviction, constantly reiterated in her writings, that our fullest and most reliable knowledge of reality can only be gained from the plural perspectives of many persons, moving about freely in a common public space and viewing objects and issues from all sides.⁶⁴ If, as this seems to imply, the kind of knowledge at which philosophy has traditionally but mistakenly aimed is in fact to be found in the very location in which political action takes place, it might seem that the long rift between philosophy and politics could in principle be healed.

Socrates or Heidegger?

As we have seen, many of Arendt's comments on the relation between philosophy and politics contrast the openness and pluralism of political thinking with traditional philosophy's quest for coercive truth. But what if authentically philosophical thinking is as endless and inconclusive a business as political discussion itself? What if Plato and the early Heidegger were mistaken about the nature of their own activity, and Socrates, Jaspers and the later Heidegger right? Are the barriers between philosophy and politics removed, making way for a new harmony? Up to a point, Arendt does seem to have believed that this was so. After all, the revised conception of philosophy undermines the ancient dream of the philosopher king who can override political opinions because he has access to the absolute truth. As Arendt had remarked in 1954 in her lecture on 'Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought', one of the conditions for a renewal of political philosophy was precisely that philosophers should no longer claim any special wisdom in political affairs.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, however, this does not mean that all the barriers are down, and that there is no longer any necessary difference between authentic philosophy and the kind of free political thinking that she attributed to Lessing. For although in her later writings she detached philosophy unambiguously from the quest for truth, she insisted ever more strongly on the other obstacle that divides philosophy from politics, namely its solitariness: the fact, as she sees it, that philosophy demands a withdrawal of the thinker from the world.⁶⁶ In *The Life of the Mind* she reaffirmed what she had been saying throughout her work: that thinking is a dialogue between me and myself that can take place only in solitude, away from public affairs. Political philosophy,

⁶⁴ HC 50, 57. ⁶⁵ 'Concern with Politics' 023251.

⁶⁶ Cf. Lectures on 'Philosophy and Politics: What is Political Philosophy?' (1969) 024429; 024445–6. James Knauer's attempt to find in Arendt a unity of theory and practice runs counter to her persistent reflection on this point (J.T. Knauer, 'Hannah Arendt on Judgement, Philosophy and Praxis', *International Studies in Philosophy* 21/3 (1989) 71–83).

therefore, seems still to be a self-contradictory enterprise: for how is the political philosopher to be sufficiently withdrawn to be able to practise philosophy, and yet sufficiently attuned to the public world to understand and appreciate public action?

In another of the essays sparked off by the Eichmann affair, a brilliant meditation on 'Thinking and Moral Considerations',⁶⁷ Arendt tried out an ingenious way of bridging this gulf between the thinker and the world. Reflecting there upon the apparent connection between Eichmann's evil deeds and his sheer *thoughtlessness*, she suggested that there may after all be some practical usefulness in thinking, and that the thinker's withdrawal from the world may in the end feed back into action. For although the inner dialogue of thought, practised paradigmatically by Socrates, cannot deliver an authoritative answer or provide instructions on what one ought to do, it does have certain implications, mainly of a negative kind, that can make a difference in time of crisis. For one thing (as we have seen) the habit of being alone with oneself in the internal dialogue of thinking activates not only consciousness but conscience, setting limits to what one can do, simply because one will have to live with oneself afterwards in full consciousness of one's deeds. Again, thinking questions all certainties, making it impossible for the thinker to drift with the crowd and adopt generally accepted opinions without scrutiny. Most positively (though Arendt did not enlarge upon the suggestion in this essay), thinking liberates 'the faculty of judgement . . . the most political of man's mental abilities'. The ability to judge what is right or wrong may be absolutely vital 'in the rare moments when the chips are down'.⁶⁸

The implication of these reflections appears to be that if Eichmann had been capable of reflective thinking, he could never have become a Nazi; the life of the mind would have immunised him against it. For a thinker trying to connect philosophy and politics, this must have been a comforting conclusion, but it was scarcely one in which Arendt could rest. For the obvious riposte was that, in that moment in 1933 when the chips were down, thinking of the most profound kind did not apparently do anything to save Heidegger from supporting Nazism, at any rate for a time. Arendt did not comment directly upon this discrepancy, but it is surely revealing that in another article published in the same year as 'Thinking and Moral Considerations', in celebration of Heidegger's eightieth birthday, she offered a quite different account of the practical implications that follow from the thinker's withdrawal from the world. Stressing once again the need for that withdrawal if thinking is to be possible, she suggests there that whereas lesser thinkers withdraw into the solitude of thought from time to

⁶⁷ 1971. See note 62 above.

⁶⁸ 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' 446.

time, Heidegger is one of the few who has actually taken up 'residence' in the 'abode' of thinking. And in contrast to her argument in 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' that solitary thinking may liberate sound political judgement, in the Heidegger essay she suggests that it is more likely to weaken the thinker's common sense and to incapacitate him for life in the world. She recalls that Thales, gazing at the stars, fell into a well and was laughed at for his pains; Plato embarked upon the preposterous enterprise of trying to turn a tyrant into a philosopher king; and Heidegger also entirely misjudged the situation in the world when he emerged briefly from his reflections to give countenance to Hitler.⁶⁹

Socrates or Heidegger? Which is the better model for the political implications of philosophical thought? The fact that these two essays date from the same year, 1971, reveals something of the dialogue still going on within Arendt's mind. It is therefore particularly interesting to read the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* that date from the same period, because Arendt believed that she could find in Kant one unquestionably great philosopher who could be said to be in harmony with free politics, both in the practical sense of sympathising with republics rather than with tyrants, and in the theoretical sense of having a less solitary and more political conception of what was involved in philosophy itself. Kant held, according to Arendt, that 'company is indispensable for the *thinker*',⁷⁰ and that although thinking itself can be done only in solitude, it cannot be done effectively without that freedom to communicate and to exchange one's thoughts in public which enables one to enlarge one's mind by incorporating the insights of others.⁷¹ Kant's critical thinking depends upon 'public use of one's reason',⁷² and feeds back into public life in its turn by questioning authorities and accepted assumptions⁷³ and making possible impartial judgements. Her account of Kant is strongly reminiscent of her picture of that other free thinker, his contemporary, Lessing, with one very important difference: Lessing, whose thought was so thoroughly political, was not a philosopher, but no one could possibly deny that title to Kant. We might therefore be tempted to suppose that after all her deliberations about the relations between politics and philosophy, Arendt had at last found them reconciled in Kant, and taken him as her model of the truly political philosopher.

Alas, as usually happens with Arendt, the case is not so simple. For one thing, her apparent solution is reached only by way of an interpretation of

⁶⁹ 'Heidegger at Eighty' 301–3.

⁷⁰ *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982) 10.

⁷¹ *Kant's Political Philosophy* 40, 42.

⁷² *Kant's Political Philosophy* 39.

⁷³ *Kant's Political Philosophy* 38.

Kant that is highly selective, not to say perverse. In her lectures she purports to find in the *Critique of Judgement* Kant's 'unwritten political philosophy',⁷⁴ airily dismissing his more obviously political writings, as well as choosing to ignore for the moment those rigidly dogmatic features of his moral philosophy that she had elsewhere stigmatised as 'inhuman'.⁷⁵ Furthermore, even if she could reinterpret Kant in a way that made possible a reconciliation between philosophy and politics, this does nothing to alter the anti-political stance of so many of the other philosophers whom she admired, Plato, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Heidegger.

In *The Life of the Mind* she confronted the problem again. The dominant theme of the first volume, *Thinking*, is the strange lack of fit between the life of the mind and the world of appearance in which we live. To think, we have to withdraw from this world into an invisible and timeless realm where we are alone with ourselves, a withdrawal which in the history of philosophy has often seemed akin to death.⁷⁶ Arendt makes clear that this withdrawal is at the expense of alert attention to the world, speaking of the 'intramural warfare between thought and common sense'⁷⁷ that it implies. And if the first volume suggests an inherent tension between thinking and doing, the second, on the much more practical activity of 'willing', does nothing to bridge the gap. For the main theme here is the strange neglect by philosophers of the human capacity to will spontaneously and make new beginnings in the world. One reason for this, according to Arendt, is that willing as a conscious activity was simply not discovered until the Christian era.⁷⁸ But another, she suggests, may be the result of 'a basic conflict between the experiences of the thinking ego and those of the willing ego'.⁷⁹ With the rare exception of Duns Scotus, philosophers have been uncomfortable with the sheer contingency involved in the activity of the will, finding a belief in necessity much more congenial.⁸⁰ Once again, thinking and doing, philosophy and politics seem to be at odds.

It seems likely that Arendt intended in her unwritten third volume to tackle her persistent dilemma once again, and possible that she hoped to adumbrate a *modus vivendi* between philosophy and politics, based on a distinction between two different kinds of reflective thinking: on the one hand purely philosophical thought, which is solitary and unpolitical, and on the other hand judging, which is intrinsically linked to the world.

⁷⁴ *Kant's Political Philosophy* 19, 7. Cf. P. Riley, 'Hannah Arendt on Kant, Truth and Politics', *Political Studies* 35 (1987) 379–92; R.J. Dostal, 'Judging Human Action: Arendt's Appropriation of Kant', *Review of Metaphysics* 37 (June 1984) 725–55.

⁷⁵ 'On Humanity in Dark Times' 27. Arendt was here contrasting Kant with Lessing.

⁷⁶ *L of M* I 78–9, 197. ⁷⁷ *L of M* I 80.

⁷⁸ *L of M* II 3, 55, 64. ⁷⁹ *L of M* II 4.

⁸⁰ *L of M* II 23–38. Cf. B. Honig, 'Arendt, Identity, and Difference', *Political Theory* 16/1 (February 1988) 77–98.

Speculating about the intended contents of *Judging*, the unwritten third volume of *The Life of the Mind*, is a rash undertaking. Nevertheless, both Mary McCarthy, who edited the manuscript after Arendt's death, and Ronald Beiner, who edited the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, have argued plausibly that the Kant lectures would have formed the basis for the volume.⁸¹ If so, it might well have been concerned among other things to describe a form of reflective thinking distinguished from philosophy by drawing its impetus from public life and feeding back into the world. It is certainly suggestive that, as Beiner points out, Arendt's interest in the faculty of judgement changed over time. After portraying it in her earlier work as a part of practical political action, she included it in her final book as part of the life of the mind. 'The more she reflected on the faculty of judgment, the more inclined she was to regard it as the prerogative of the solitary (though public-spirited) contemplator as opposed to the actor.'⁸² In the light of what we have seen of her long-continued reflections on the tension between philosophy and politics, it may be that one of the motives behind her shift of emphasis was the search for a form of reflection that was not intrinsically hostile to politics, as philosophy seemed to be. If this was indeed the reason, however, it would give the story a further ironic twist, for this new bridge from philosophy to politics would have been built at the cost of shifting her own focus from action to thought. As Ronald Beiner says, 'Judgment is . . . caught in the tension between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* (a dualism that pervades Arendt's entire work).'⁸³

If we attempt now to sum up Arendt's persistent reflections on philosophy and politics, can we say that she made any progress? Did any fragments of Penelope's web survive the continual unravelling that we have seen her engaged in? Some, we must answer, but with a great many loose ends. As we have seen, she reflected throughout the 1950s on two alternative pictures of the relations between philosophy and politics. The

⁸¹ M. McCarthy, 'Editor's Postface', *L of M I* 219; R. Beiner, 'Interpretive Essay', *Kant's Political Philosophy* 91. ⁸² Beiner, 'Interpretive Essay' 92.

⁸³ Beiner, 'Interpretive Essay' 140. Cf. R.J. Bernstein, 'Judging – the Actor and the Spectator' in Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986) 221–37. There are interesting parallels between Arendt's reflections on philosophy and politics and Benjamin Barber's polemic, *The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988). Barber sounds very like Arendt when he says that 'thinking about politics . . . seems inevitably to lead to thinking about thinking, and the more we think about thinking, the less we think about politics' (p. 3). Like Arendt, he defends political action against the foundationalist ambitions of philosophy. However, he does not seem to be aware how much he has in common with her, because (relying on Beiner's Kantian reading of her) he identifies her as one of 'the German school', along with Habermas (pp. 196–8). I have argued elsewhere that this sort of categorisation misses precisely what is distinctive in Arendt's approach to political theory (M. Canovan, 'A Case of Distorted Communication: a Note on Habermas and Arendt', *Political Theory* 11/1 (February 1983) 105–16).

first, associated with Plato and the Heidegger of *Being and Time* and Nazi fellow-travelling, suggested that philosophical excellence could be bought only at the cost of tyrannical sympathies in politics, because the philosopher's solitude and his quest for truth made him hostile to plurality and freedom. The second, associated with Socrates and Jaspers, suggested that on the contrary, authentic philosophy is communicative and not oriented toward exclusive truth, so that the historical tensions between philosophers and free politics have been merely contingent. In the course of her reflections (and greatly aided by Heidegger's renunciation of philosophy's claim to provide answers) Arendt moved part of the way toward the second position, removing one of the barriers between philosophy and politics by affirming that (contrary to the aspirations of most of the great philosophers) philosophy does not establish or seek for truth. The other obstacle, solitude, was harder to shift. When she thought of Socrates, philosophical solitude seemed to provide a safeguard against moral and political errors, but when she thought of Heidegger Arendt's confidence evaporated. Her reflections on Kant suggest that if she had been able to finish *The Life of the Mind*, she would have concluded that philosophical thinking has two sides to it and is a mixed blessing from a political point of view, in that although solitary thinking can facilitate judging, which is politically beneficial, it is just as likely to deprive the thinker of all common sense in political affairs. The spectre of Heidegger the Nazi haunts Arendt's reflections, forcing her again and again to tear up her attempted resolutions and to start again.

One final question is unavoidable: where do these reflections on the tensions between philosophy and politics leave Arendt's own political thinking? She was careful to deny that she was herself a 'philosopher',⁸⁴ and she told Günter Gaus that her own aim was to look at politics without philosophical prejudices.⁸⁵ The distinction she habitually made between political thinkers who had been prompted to reflection by their own commitment to politics, and philosophers for whom politics was incidental to their main concerns, suggests that she would have wished her own political thought to stand in the tradition of Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Burke and Tocqueville rather than in that of Plato and Hegel. The matter is not so simple, however. It is significant that she often spoke of 'thinking' and 'philosophy' interchangeably, implying that the unworldliness that achieves classic form in philosophy is inherent to some extent in all thinking. She was certainly aware of the tendency of her own thoughts to escape into a realm of their own, for all her insistence that 'thought . . . arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the

⁸⁴ *L of M I 3*.

⁸⁵ Gaus, *Zur Person* 12.

only guideposts by which to take its bearings'.⁸⁶ In one of her reflections on this matter, in a paper delivered to the American Political Science Association in 1960, she suggested that although thinking soars away from the incident that sets it off, it remains bound to its source, orbiting in a circle round it.⁸⁷ Another metaphor she used, however, and which she seems to have preferred (setting it out in *Between Past and Future* and repeating it in *The Life of the Mind*) is rather less reassuring.

In the 'Preface' to *Between Past and Future*, first published in 1961, she reflected on the experience of the French intellectuals who had joined the Resistance against Nazism, many of them in order 'to escape from thought into action' and who had found that action itself drove them back to political thought in order to articulate and preserve their experience. So far, she seems to be reiterating her point about the intimate link between authentic political thought and political experience. She goes on to suggest, however (in an elaborate commentary on a parable by Kafka), that such thought belongs in a 'gap between past and future' that man in so far as he is a thinking being can occupy. And the interesting point here is that although the thought trains in which he engages have a specific origin in time, and a specific direction determined by the pressures of past and future, their end lies in infinity.⁸⁸ As we have seen, Arendt's political thinking did indeed arise out of specific events, and went on to trace fascinating trajectories in the realm of ideas. But is this a kind of thinking that can loop back on itself and illuminate the world of politics? The concluding chapter will consider this question in the light of the reinterpretation of Arendt's thought I have presented.

⁸⁶ 'Preface: the Gap Between Past and Future', *Between Past and Future* 14.

⁸⁷ 'Action and the "Pursuit of Happiness"' in *Politische Ordnung und menschliche Existenz: Festgabe für Eric Voegelin* (Munich, Beck, 1962) 2.

⁸⁸ 'Preface: the Gap Between Past and Future' 12; *L of M* I 202–10.

8 Conclusion

There have been signs in recent years that interest in Arendt's thought is tending to grow. In so far as the reinterpretation presented above is accepted, it seems likely to encourage that interest, for she turns out to be a richer and more rewarding political thinker than has been generally recognised. The preceding chapters have (I hope) shown that her ideas, long acknowledged to be original and subtle, are also extremely complex, amounting in their interconnections to a considerable body of thought. This offers scope for further examination and interpretation, and as we come to understand her better many of the judgements previously passed upon her will need to be reassessed.

Such a reassessment would be a lengthy business, and this is not the place to attempt it. It may be worth drawing attention, however, to one implication of the reading presented here, which is that when Arendt's thought is traced back to the specific context from which it arose, her place in twentieth-century political theory turns out to be rather closer to the centre than we might have anticipated: she seems a less marginal figure, with concerns that are more widely shared. This is an observation that needs expansion, because it is in some ways rather paradoxical.

All readers and commentators have agreed that the central preoccupation of Arendt's political thought is the revaluation of politics and political action. Just what this means, however, can be variously understood. According to what might be called the standard interpretation, the context of her revaluation of politics was her idealisation of the Greek polis and the low esteem in which (by comparison) she held modern society. Her writings have been read as a theory about the good life, claiming that fulfilment is to be found in a kind of Athenian-style participatory politics from which most of the preoccupations of modern politics would be excluded. While readers have agreed that she was eloquent in defence of the blessings of participation, many have considered her theory eccentric, utopian, and not really *serious*, not addressed to the matters with which real politics is concerned.

This impression fades when her thought is seen in its true focus. Once we

appreciate that the proper context for all her political thinking is her continued reflection upon totalitarianism, we can see why she insists on the vital importance of politics, which appears not as an optional path to personal fulfilment for the bored denizens of affluent societies, but as a matter of life and death.

Her call for the reevaluation of politics has a number of different aspects, some of which (notably her stress on the disclosure of individuals in action) have been widely appreciated, while others have tended to be neglected or overlooked. The most urgent is perhaps her message about our responsibility for politics: our duty to be citizens, looking after the world and taking responsibility for what is done in our name. We have seen how she addressed this message both to the unpolitical Jews who had drifted toward the Holocaust and to Eichmann, the perfect bureaucrat who had just obeyed orders. She insisted, furthermore, that people could not avoid responsibility for what was being done by turning their attention to higher things, as Romantic poets and unworldly philosophers had tried to do. And if she was a harsh critic of political irresponsibility under the conditions of pre-war Germany, it is not surprising that she had even less patience with American citizens who enjoyed the blessing of a free constitution, but who were too immersed in their private consumption to notice what use was being made of their power.

Besides this summons to political responsibility, another aspect of Arendt's reevaluation of politics, also prompted by her experience of totalitarianism, was her sense of the urgent need for a better understanding of political action – both of its potentialities and of its limits. She became convinced that the catastrophes of her time had been facilitated (not caused) by distorted notions about politics. These distortions included both the fatalism that led people to deny their own capacity for free action and the hubris that led them to believe that everything is possible, that we can remake the world. In totalitarianism, as we have seen, she believed that both errors were united, but once she had traced part of the misunderstanding to traditional political philosophy she was anxious to reach a clearer sense of what could and could not be expected from politics.

Her concern with limits is particularly worthy of note because she has often been seen as a supporter of gratuitous activism. In truth, her sense of the danger of hubris and the need for limits is a constant theme in her work. Human beings, she said, can indeed act, can interrupt processes already in motion and bring something new into being. But these miraculous capacities are dangerous, and it is therefore important to be aware what sort of activity politics is *not*. It is not a field for the action of deterministic forces, but neither is it a canvas for the exercise of creative will. We cannot make history or remake our world, and we need above all to remember that

political action is something that happens among plural actors. This means that each person's aims are continually liable to be frustrated by other people's initiatives, although power and stability can be generated by agreements between human beings.

Action, to Arendt, is therefore not simply a blessing but a problem and an agenda. On the one hand, it is something to be thought about a great deal more than it has been by political thinkers – a project on which she started, but in which (as she would have been the first to agree) there is plenty of room for others to follow. Above all, however, it is a practical activity, not a matter of executing theoretical blueprints but something to be *practised* with courage, skill and restraint.

Sureness in the theory and practice of politics seemed particularly important to her because of her conviction, rooted in the experience of her time, that the only possible solutions to the predicaments of the modern world would have to be political solutions. Faced with runaway modernisation and the means of mass destruction, with the breakdown of tradition and authority, the loss of standards and the threat of nihilism, she believed (as we have seen) that if answers could be found at all, they would be found in the political capacity of human beings. Having the gifts of initiative and plurality, we are able to form a space between us in which a human world can come into being. By means of agreements with one another, we can give birth to power and authority within that space, bestow rights upon one another and achieve some measure of stability to shelter mortal life. It is politics, in other words, that gives us the possibility of humanising the lawless wilderness.

It is not surprising that this aspect of Arendt's thinking has been largely overlooked. The period of catastrophic change and international anarchy out of which it arose was followed by a long post-war period when international politics was frozen into immobility by the Cold War, and when it seemed to many in Western countries that disagreements inside the boundaries of sovereign states over the distribution of the gross national product was all that politics could possibly be about. But recent events around the world have drawn our attention back to the kind of quintessentially political phenomena that Arendt was trying to articulate and reflect upon. On the one hand, in dramatic events ranging from military invasions to the destruction of communism in Eastern Europe, human beings have demonstrated their capacity to do the thoroughly unexpected, to smash established institutions (including states) and upset all certainties (including borders). On the other hand, in the multifarious negotiations that are attempting to find political settlements to violent and apparently insoluble disputes, we can see the other side of political action, the ability to bridge over abysses that laws do not span, and, by binding enemies into

political agreements, to create new public spaces where disputes can be talked about instead of being fought over.

If Arendt's political thought turns out to have considerable relevance to current happenings in world politics, it is also in tune with contemporary developments in political thinking. One of the reasons for the great stress she laid upon politics was, as we have seen, that she was an 'anti-foundationalist' long before the term came into use, doing her thinking 'without a bannister',¹ convinced of what Rorty has called 'the priority of democracy to philosophy'² and of the capacity of political men to act without philosophical authorisation. Part of the point of revaluing politics was, for her, to overcome what Benjamin Barber calls its 'conquest' by philosophy.³ It seems safe to predict that this 'postmodern' side of her thought is likely to attract increasing attention.⁴

When Arendt's exaltation of politics is set in its proper context, against the background of her reflections on totalitarianism, some features of her thought become considerably less puzzling. If our implicit image of politics is the British Parliament or the US Congress, the stress she laid upon the human capacity to overcome mortality by acting in public and leaving behind the memory of one's deeds may be hard to understand, whereas it makes more sense when we realise that she was remembering (for example) the heroism of those who resisted Nazism, and of all who risked their lives for freedom. Even her dismissive attitude to socio-economic questions is more comprehensible and less offensive when read in context. To British and American readers who take for granted the existence of civilised states with secure borders and assured rights, this tends to seem like a bizarre evasion of the central concerns of politics. Set against the political agenda of Europe in the 1940s and 1950s, which was dominated by war, conquest,

¹ 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt' in M.A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: the Recovery of the Public World* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1979) 336.

² R. Rorty, 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy' in M. Peterson and K. Vaughan (ed.), *The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom: 200 Years After* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988) 257–82. Although there are similarities between their positions, there is a complete difference in tone. For Arendt, as for anyone of her generation in Europe, the relaxed tone in which Rorty assumes that we can take a liberal political system for granted without needing to worry about its foundation would have seemed grotesquely unrealistic. In one of her early essays, Arendt marvelled at the complacent lack of awareness of what had been happening in the concentration camps of Europe shown by the American philosopher John Dewey (who is, of course, one of Rorty's mentors) ('The Ivory Tower of Common Sense', *The Nation* 19 October 1946 447–9).

³ B. Barber, *The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁴ See for example J.C. Isaac, 'Arendt, Camus, and Postmodern Politics', *Praxis International* 9/1–2 (April–July 1989) 48–71; B. Honig, 'Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic', *American Political Science Review* 85/1 (March 1991) 97–113.

genocide, statelessness and kindred catastrophes, it looks a little different – and such events are not unknown in the contemporary world.

All the same, there is of course another reason why she insisted on understanding politics in non-socio-economic terms. As we have seen, her thinking about ‘society’ was rooted in an idiosyncratic interpretation of modernity centred on the ‘liberation of the life process’ and built around an analogy with totalitarianism. And this reminds us that there are two sides to the reinterpretation presented here. Setting Arendt’s thought in its context allows us to recover what may appear to be thoroughly ‘postmodern’ insights into politics, but also presents us with a story of modernity that is unlikely to find favour in a time so suspicious of ‘grand narratives’.⁵ If, as I have argued, all Arendt’s thought trains are interconnected, we seem to be left with a paradox.

There are indeed two levels of paradox involved. In the first place, readers are asked to believe that setting Arendt’s ideas in context renders them not only more comprehensible but also more generally relevant. Sceptics may object that those of her commentators who left aside her writings on totalitarianism did so precisely because they were more interested in her general political theory than in her reactions to specific events. On the face of it, this may seem perfectly reasonable. Nevertheless, I have tried to show that this traditional strategy is counterproductive. If (in quest of ideas of general interest) we start from *The Human Condition*, what we find seems exotic but marginal. It is only when we go back to the roots of her thought, to be found in her reflections on the specific events of her time, that we get at the important things she had to say about politics in general.

There is a second paradox here, however, for although it is true that we can learn most from Arendt if we trace her thought trains to their source, it must be admitted that the first thing we find when we do go back to her thinking about Nazism and Stalinism may be something of an embarrassment: a brilliant, ambitious and highly questionable interpretation of totalitarianism and modernity. Faced with criticisms of *Totalitarianism*, her defenders have tended to claim that, whatever its defects, her book was exceptionally faithful to the phenomena as actually experienced. Its impact was to a large extent a tribute to the widespread feeling that Arendt had done justice to the momentousness of what had actually happened.⁶ But while in some respects this is certainly true, we have seen above that

⁵ J.F. Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984) xxiii.

⁶ For an example of the persistence of this feeling, see A. Heller, ‘An Imaginary Preface to the 1984 Edition of Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*’ in F. Fehér and A. Heller, *Eastern Left, Western Left: Totalitarianism, Freedom and Democracy* (Cambridge, Polity, 1987) 243–59.

Totalitarianism presents an elaborate theory, itself closely connected with her analysis of modernity as 'the unnatural growth of the natural'. This whole area of her thought has been neglected, and her interconnected accounts of totalitarianism, modernity and 'society' require thorough reassessment of a kind that cannot be attempted here. It may be conjectured, however, that although the reinterpretation presented above should have made these accounts more comprehensible, it is unlikely to have made them altogether persuasive.

If (as I have argued throughout this book) all Arendt's ideas are closely interwoven, does this mean that the whole of her political thinking stands or falls with the theory of totalitarianism with which it started? At first glance, this conclusion might appear to follow, but I hope that the reader is by this stage of the book disposed to resist it. Just as her own quest for the ancient roots of political experience was not a matter of trying to revive Athenian democracy but of diving into the deep waters of the past in search of 'pearls' and 'coral'⁷ to enrich her understanding of twentieth-century politics, so our own study of her thought involves a double movement, back to the roots of her thinking so that we can understand her, but then forward again to see what we can learn from her. We will not understand her if we are unaware of the interconnections of her thought, but we need not suppose that her importance as a political thinker depends upon the acceptability of her story of modernity.

Original political thinkers have very often worked out their insights in the context of a story of some kind, and the fruitfulness of those insights does not depend upon the persuasiveness of the story. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau tell us different stories about the state of nature, and Hegel and Marx different stories about world-history. In each case, although insights and story are organically linked, we can learn from the former without having to suspend our disbelief in the latter. And the same is true for Arendt: although her story of totalitarianism and of 'the unnatural growth of the natural' provided the indispensable framework within which she developed her own particular political insights, those insights can be detached from that context and generalised.

Is it an unjustifiable inflation of Arendt's intellectual stature to talk about her in the same breath as these towering figures of Western political thought? Lecturing in 1955 on the history of political thought, she remarked that each of the key political thinkers of the past 'has thrown one word into our world, has augmented it by this one word, because he responded rightly and thoughtfully to certain decisively new experiences of

⁷ 'Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940' (1968) in *Men in Dark Times* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1970) 193–206.

his time'.⁸ After following her thought trains we must, I think, concede that in the course of her own response to the experiences of her time, Arendt also 'augmented' the world by one word: the word 'plurality'. The most fruitful way of reading her political thought is, I believe, to treat her analysis of modernity as a context for the interesting things she has to say about the fact that politics goes on among plural persons with space between them.

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