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HANNAH ARENDT: SELF, COMMUNITY, AND THE SPECTER OF
TOTALITARIANISM

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Hannah Arendt: Self, Community, and the Specter of Totalitarianism

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The argument that I present is that Arendt falls short of providing a mitigation of the political crisis of modernity. She commits what I see as a fundamental error, that of confusing an existential self for a political self. Her primary goal, I believe, is to establish a means by which we may exercise the existential self safely, from within a virtuous community. The concern I have with Arendt's political work is that it does not provide a political solution to political problems, but rather relies on an existential self-exposure that lacks the values of political commitment. Despite all of her good intentions, the result is a politics without direction.

Arendt is unwilling to allow human civilization to be thrown onto the rubbish heap, and she attempts to indicate the ways in which humanity can actively create and maintain the world: we need not succumb to fate. Arendt wants to strip the individual of both narcissism and hubris, of the compulsion

toward authenticity, and wants Self and community to recognize that both are man-made. Because of the artifice of both, each requires a constant vigilance and care. Her political thought relies upon an insistence on the human ability to create and respond, to actively generate the world in which we live. Public space is to be valued as that which allows individuals to overcome their sense of superfluousness, and thus, public space is valued not as a political starting point, but for its own being-ness. She attempts to substitute the yearning of existentialism into an expressly political domain.

Ultimately, it is Arendt's narrow reading of 'ideology' on which her theory flounders. She fails to recognize that ideologies can be viewed as either 'progressive' or 'reactionary,' viewing all instead as part of a single Tradition. However, as I argue, without ideology, we cannot translate political goods into political goals. Arendt refuses to view ideology as a freely-chosen position that represents my choices about the 'best society,' of what I wish to attach myself to in order to see my principles and interests met.

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Introduction

Hannah Arendt is the consummate political thinker of the modern condition. She raises, throughout her body of work, the important questions and dilemmas that face us, politically speaking, under the condition of modernity. And while we might come away from her works with a nuanced appreciation of what it means to exist in modernity, we need to ask whether she provides us with a meaningful way by which we might confront our modern condition. In other words, while she points to us the crisis before us, does she help resolve that crisis? Or, perhaps less emphatically, how does her thought help us mitigate the political crisis of modernity?

The argument that I will present here is that Arendt falls short of providing this mitigation, and the reason for this is simple: there is nothing contained within her prescriptions that suggests an end. For her, politics is for the sake of being political, for ensuring that a public space is cared for in which political 'acting' can occur. But there is no argument, no recognition of politics for something larger. She commits what I see as a fundamental error, that of confusing an existential self for a political self. Her primary goal, I believe, is to establish a means by which we may exercise the existential self safely, from within a virtuous

community. In so doing, she ignores political goals in favor of political goods. Despite all of her good intentions, we end up with a hollow politics, a politics without direction, a politics of testimony and storytelling, but without movement.

Thus, my intent in this discussion of Arendt is to set out a reading of self and community in Arendt's political writings. Here, I want to emphasize that I want to bracket Arendt's philosophic works as background to her political works. In other words, I wish to reflect upon her more philosophic pursuits only when a direct correlation to her political works is present. My job, as I see it, is not to remark upon whether her philosophical underpinnings are reflected in her political work consistently, nor whether her philosophy adequately describes modern concerns. I am not so much interested in her categories in the abstract as opposed to how she presented herself as an engaged participant, commenting upon the concreteness of the world. I thus will privilege *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and *On Revolution*, and her occasional essays over *The Human Condition*, *Between Past and Future* and her Kant Lectures.

The 'political' has to do with the identification, framing, and addressing of crises in the lived world. Politics, thus, may be considered a phenomenological activity, derived from paying attention to and interpreting the world as it is. Obviously, there are a multiplicity of issues here with regard to the relative salience and importance of issues, but to open up this discussion would be both self-indulgent and beside the point: I want to prioritize the phenomena that Arendt saw as demanding attention and her interpretive conclusions. In other words, I

accept, without question, Arendt's phenomenological presentation. What I do want to question, however, is to what extent does her 'promise of politics' lead us out of the conundrum of the modern political crisis. Or, to put it differently, does Arendt provide us with a platform on which we can construct a politics to address the very issues she articulates?

Why do we read Arendt?

Is there any question as to why we continue to read and comment upon Hannah Arendt's work? Both richly complex, and endlessly confounding, Arendt holds our attention not simply because her subject matter is so often highly dramatic, but also because, at the core, there is a vibrantly humanistic voice present: her approach to politics, while often flawed, extends a compassion for humanity that is often lacking in other commentators' approaches to the modern condition. This essay will privilege a reading of Arendt that situates her as Benhabib has called her, a 'reluctant modernist.' That is, Arendt shall be positioned here as a thinker who engages modernity not to escape it, but rather, in the best tradition of political theory, to critique and address the concerns of the 'political crisis of modernity.' And while she is a critic, this does not mean she wants to dismiss or eliminate the modern. Rather, she searches for the means by which we might contain the excesses of our modern situation.

This reading, it should be noted, is not without controversy. With Benhabib, I challenge the standard reading of Arendt as an "antimodernist lover

of the Greek polis.”¹ It is easy to see how this has become the standard reading, particularly if we engage her philosophical works. However, what I attempt here is a strictly political reading of Arendt, one that privileges the phenomenological analyses as opposed to her attempts to construct a metaphysical framework of interpretation. Even so, while she may be a critic, even condemning modernity,² Arendt can also bring us into further conversation with the modern condition in any number of ways:

For the participatory democrat, it is Arendt’s notion of citizenship proposed in the *Politics*, that open new vistas to contemporary theory. For the Critical Theorist, it is her rediscovery of Aristotle’s distinction between acting and making that is significant, since this makes possible a comprehensive theory of communicative action and consensual rationality. Finally, for the communitarian, Arendt restates the fundamental insight of the third book of the *Politics*; namely, that citizens must be bound together by more than a desire for mutual benefit if they are to experience the existential and moral enrichment that politics can provide.³

The question thus becomes one of how we want to use Arendt, for obviously, depending upon one’s starting point, a different Arendt will emerge.

The Arendt that shall be portrayed here is existentialist and humanist, a critic of modernity, but a supporter of Enlightenment principles: she is most certainly not a “postmodernist avant la lettre.”⁴ And, while she may certainly be writing against ‘the Tradition,’⁵ she is perhaps not writing against any particular tradition—because she simply can’t see the competing political traditions in

¹ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. 1996. p. xxv

² Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 109

³ Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1996. p. 8

⁴ Seyla Benhabib, 1996, op. cit., p. 197

⁵ see, for example, Dana Villa, 1996, op. cit., p. 9

modern thought: modernity for her is lumped together under a single rubric (the Tradition). And it is precisely for this reason that Arendt can be interpreted in so many varied ways—as radical democrat, civic republican, communitarian. This very ambiguity as to where she stands with regard to political project (tradition) is what, I believe, leads to not just the inconsistencies in her thought, but more significantly, to a confusion between the existential self and the political self. Confrontation with the idea of the Self—whether existential or political—is, as I shall address shortly, perhaps the defining hallmark of the modern condition. However, how we might contend with this figure of the Self in modern politics is highly contingent on the political tradition from which we work: when these traditions are ignored, and we only consider the Tradition, this Self—let alone politics—gets lost in the process.

Even though Arendt's political thought may be lacking when subjected to asking if a workable politics is present, she does offer us a rich perspective from which to discuss the political crises of modernity. And it is precisely because of her blind spots, her contradictions, that we can find her so compelling today. For, at its heart, Arendt's commentaries display a great humanism: she is neither a misanthrope nor a pessimist. Above all else, she is an astute observer of the messiness of human life under the conditions of modernity. And, unlike so many of her contemporaries, she is unwilling to allow human civilization to be thrown onto the rubbish heap. Arendt is a steadfast defender of human potential and possibility. As Dana Villa has put it:

Arendt's political thought is based on the idea that only a durable man-made world of laws, institutions, and culture prevents human

beings from being assimilated to nature and natural necessity. Such assimilation would make them lose the very thing that makes them human: their capacity for freedom, for beginning.⁶

And this is, indeed, precisely why we should return to Arendt. The modern condition can seem hopeless; the tragedies of the twentieth century too great to bear. Human civilization does, after the Holocaust, after Hiroshima, seem vested in annihilation. Arendt reminds us that, even in such dark times, humanity has a boundless capacity for creativity and reinvention. Indeed, one of Arendt's great strengths is that she does seem to recognize, in a highly nuanced manner, the sticky mess in which we must live. However, the danger that she succumbs to, as with so many others commenting upon the modern condition, is that she confuses an existential response with a political response.

This is, indeed, understandable, for this question of the Self becomes the defining dilemma of politics in modernity. And, as shall be clarified shortly, the Self seems to be the final bastion against totalization. Yet, to commit the Self against such totalization is also to divorce oneself from the community. As Arendt witnessed, such a divorce leads to tragedy. She is far too astute to make a case for ignoring the Self—but neither does she advocate some sort of 'heroic' Self. Rather, she wants a Self bounded by community, where the modern promise of the 'adventure' of the Self might be lived out safely and productively.

Placing the Self at the center as she does, is, ultimately, what will lead her political thought awry. For, in attempting to negotiate this 'daring' modern Self, she ends up—perhaps unwittingly—minimizing the Self. This is, I believe, where

⁶ Dana Villa, *Public Freedom*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. pp. 215-16.

the charges of 'elitism' emerge. As I see it, however, this is less elitism than an abstracted, minimized, and most importantly, purified Self that she articulates. She will privilege the 'good citizen' over the 'good man,' and this will lead to politics that, in the words of Canovan, "is surely too romantic to be helpful..."⁷

Although Arendt goes to great lengths to make the point that 'men, not Man, live in the world,' and to emphasize the necessity of 'acting in concert,' this never leads to a recognition of or construction of solidarity. Rather, her 'politics' involves care for the world by showing oneself in the world. Granted, this entails a protection and sanctification of public space. But this is not the public space of sorting out and assessing what is required for a 'best society.' Instead, for her, public space is to be valued for just that: the public space is valued not for what men might make using it as a starting point, but rather for its own being-ness. The point is that public space allows me to experience and expose my Self; it is where I experience my fundamental humanity. The concern I have with Arendt's political work is that it does not provide a political solution to political problems, but rather relies on an existential self-exposure that lacks the values of political commitment.

However, it would be far too easy to dismiss Arendt on these grounds. She was, after all, attempting to come up with, if not a 'way out,' then at least a means of reconciling ourselves with the crisis of modernity, to find a way that we might still feel 'at home in the world,' despite the horrors of the twentieth century. Moreover, we should not find her reliance on a configuring of Self as the lens

⁷ Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1974. p. 125

through which she views the political: it is no coincidence that an existentialist response emerges as a corrective to totalitarianism. Existentialism's unrelenting insistence that the person has an ethical positioning outside of all organizational structures, that this self, despite everything, can still be free, can still take responsibility, and have agency, provides a heady philosophical grounding for resistance. But there is a danger here, one which, I think, Arendt is all too acutely aware of, and that is, quite simply, that existentialism, wrongly channeled, can easily turn to heroism, to political thrill-seeking in attempt to escape experiential boredom.

The political crisis of modernity

The [First World] war had materially impoverished and morally confounded millions. The existential panic it left behind corrupted ethical standards, eroded manners, convulsed culture, and polarized society. The liberals were weak and, except for the first months of the [Weimar] republic, dispirited. The bureaucracy remained pro-monarchist and authoritarian at heart. The conservatives despised the new republican regime. The Communists strove to overthrow it. The Social Democrats were disoriented; their leaders, for the most part, were mediocre, provincial, unimaginative men lacking in courage and moral seriousness.⁸

Against this backdrop Arendt will first raise questions of the Self in her dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*. And of course, twenty years into the

⁸ Amos Elon, *The Pity of it All: A History of Jews in Germany, 1743-1933*, New York: Metropolitan Books. 2002, p. 353.

future, this devastation will greatly intensify. But the question remains: Why turn to the Self as a political response to this crisis?

For many interpreters, beginning with Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the events of the first half of the twentieth century appear as the failure of Enlightenment values, of the Western tradition.⁹ But this perhaps veers too far into the philosophical to be of use here: rather, we need to focus on the socio-political aspects of the modern crisis, particularly as related to this concept of the 'Self.' This is modernity as characterized by Weber's "iron cages," the modernity of liberty and discipline.¹⁰

The Self, as an individual, emerges as a politically central character in the condition we call modernity: indeed, we may even indicate this emergence as the hallmark of the modern condition. But this Self is always an overdetermined being in both political and philosophical thought, and attempting to sort out these various strands that compose the idea of the Self is a significant part of what political projects must address when attempting to answer 'what is the best society?' In other words, the 'version' of the Self we wish to privilege depends upon what we view as the appropriate relation between Self and community: modern politics takes on the character of not simply legitimizing a particular political style as 'best,' but also raises the question of which type of Self is 'best'. That is, from a socio-political standpoint, the Self becomes an object of choices and attachments: social roles are not written in stone, but become subject to

⁹ There is, of course, a significant literature that picks up this theme; to develop this in more detail here would take us too far from the task at hand.

¹⁰ Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline*, London: Routledge. 1994, p. xii

choices made. Of course, whether those choices are indeed freely available is a question of the surrounding socio-political apparatus. Hence, the Self, the version one wishes to project into the world, becomes intimately tied to political projects. This issue of the linkage between the Self and political projects is where Arendt will run aground, but as this shall be the topic of the concluding chapter, let it suffice to say for now that there is a great deal of difference in speaking of the Self with regard to Tradition as opposed to the Self within political traditions.

What does need to be addressed here is a more generic understanding of the Self in the modern condition. By the time Arendt writes, the idea that one has some sort of property over one's Self is without doubt; this is the ideal of conscience that traces itself back to the Reformation. Moreover, this conscience is politically expressed with the democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. We can thus sum up this Self as one who has agency and can thus make judgments, and act in accord with his beliefs and values. Politically—at least ideally—this conscient Self assesses his interests and translates them to political principle. Again politically speaking, he has liberty.

The other side of the modern coin is that of discipline. With the expansion of the state and of capitalist economics, personal liberty is constrained. The state—via laws and bureaucracy—seems to run against the ideal of a free conscience. The state, as an anonymous entity (as opposed to the personal power of a liege lord) establishes limits to that which I may pursue. The Self, in opposition to the promise established earlier, also becomes anonymous in the

eyes of the state. The Self becomes a contradiction: on the one hand, I am the agent, the creator of my life; on the other, I am a faceless member of ‘society’. My life becomes measured by the boundaries established by the society in which I live. Living a life outside of the legal boundaries of the state, or withdrawing oneself from the market, is virtually unthinkable. Each must, if he is to get on in life, allow himself to be constrained by these forces. It is little wonder that Camus would allegorize the modern individual as Sisyphus. Social and political thinkers will start to speak of alienation and atomization; European society will be called decadent, and in need of cleansing. The Enlightenment promise of Progress seems to have led to boredom—at least a boredom at the existential level. Hence, an emphasis on the freedom of the Self, eventually translated into ‘...an aesthetic-philosophical assertion of subjectivity,” which, as Bronner also notes, is “an anti-political form of politics...”¹¹

And this style of subjectivity—as we shall see when we get to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—is precisely what leads to the easy acceptance of totalitarian impulse, ironic as it may be. For what do these movements of fascism and communism promote alike? Quite simply, it is a heroic recovery of the subject, perverted. The totalitarian movements promise a radical recovery of a world, albeit a world turned upside down for any appreciative thinker. The subject—the Self—need not be relegated to alienation and atomization, but can become a producer of History. And of course, this was a seductive claim for those who felt turned into nothing after the Great War—a War that promised adventure and

¹¹ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*, New York: Columbia University Press. 2004. pp. 97-98

cleansing; a War that suggested that the boredom of modern society would at last come to an end.

It would be far too easy to simply point the finger and blame this egregious compulsion against boredom—measured in terms of this heroic, adventurous Self—as the cause of the tragedy of the twentieth century: box the Self back into society, demand that we view the state and society from a communal perspective, and damn the egoism. But this would be stupid. This quest for subjectivity is something that has deep roots, and the resentment expressed in the existential quest points to the failure of the state to accommodate the robust Self. The problem is less that people do not have liberty—that was established with the democratic revolutions—but that they feel—and here Arendt is quite on target—that their lives are without meaning, that there is a loneliness and a feeling of helplessness, that they have become superfluous.¹² And indeed, the phenomenon of totalitarianism demonstrates how easily individuals can become superfluous. Herein lies the essential motive behind Arendt's work: how do we prevent humanity from becoming superfluous?

At home in the world

While totalitarianism may be the clearest moment of this sense of superfluousness for Arendt, she sees this as the crucial dilemma of the modern condition. For her, this superfluousness is indicative of a longing to create

¹² Canovan, 1974, op. cit., p. 25

meaning both in one's life and in the world. That is, her political project is tied to reasserting humanity's centrality in the world. Her project is to indicate the ways in which humanity can actively create and maintain the world: we need not succumb to fate. However, in doing this, she will attempt to avoid much of the apparatus of modern politics: for her, 'the political' will concentrate on an expressive element, where politics becomes "...the public actions and interactions of particular individual men, and the events which they bring about...."¹³ In other words, for Arendt, the experience of being *zoon politikon* is tightly wound with the recognition of Self and is the paramount purpose of politics.

Arendt thus wants to act as a counterweight to the Damoclean dilemma of establishing political forms either on the basis of the prioritization of the individual or of sacrificing the individual to some form of solidarity.

In Arendt's case, the expression of her moral "taste" put her at odds with many who put solidarity at the head of the political virtues, who viewed fundamental political commitments as entailing the abdication of the privilege of independent judgment. Arendt clung fiercely to this privilege, holding it to be the core of any defensible idea of human dignity.¹⁴

The position taken in this paper is that she is not attempting to privilege one side of this divide over the other; the matter for her is not as simple as favoring one side of the dilemma over the other. Rather, the point is that each side of the dilemma must be contained by the other; neither one has an obviously superior ethical grounding. And, while she may very well 'cling to the privilege of

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 2

¹⁴ Dana R. Villa, "Thinking and Judging," in Joke J. Hermesen and Dana R. Villa, eds. *The Judge and the Spectator: Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy*, Leuven: Peeters. 1999, p. 13

individual judgment,' it is an individual judgment that must, necessarily, exercise that judgment 'in concert.' Arendt wants to strip the individual of both narcissism and hubris, of the compulsion toward authenticity, and she will want to do the same to the community. Rather, she wants both sides of the equation—self and community—to recognize that both are man-made, created; and that because of the artifice of both, each require a constant vigilance and care. She will never fall back onto positions that assume either essence or teleology. Rather, her political thought shall rely upon an insistence on the human ability to create and respond, to actively generate the world in which we live.

What this means for us, her interpreters, is that her proposed response to the modern condition is that we can only respond to this crisis by recognizing a commonality amongst us—the commonality that we share this world, and in sharing this world, derive some set of common experience amongst us.¹⁵ This 'experience' has, as we shall see, more than a whiff of the existential about it, for this experience will be how we come to both negotiate the pull of the 'expressive' Self and to find the grounds to constitute our common existence—of how we learn how to escape alienation and atomization. The existential commitment to Self, in other words, leads Arendt to a political concern for the world. So, for Arendt, the 'expressive' moment of the Self moves in lockstep with the attempt to find a 'home,' and hence she will emphasize 'acting in concert' as the foundation of political life: "...the human race exists in order to be at home in the world and

¹⁵ Stan Spyros Draenos, "Thinking Without a Ground: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Situation of Understanding" in Melvyn A. Hill (ed.) *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, New York: St. Martin's Press. 1979, p. 212

on earth; that our humanity is tied to the absence of alienation...”¹⁶ For Arendt, ridding ourselves of alienation will require both care of the Self and care for the World.

For Arendt, commonality does not take on the characteristics of liberal communitarianism of the ‘encumbered self.’ Rather, we should perhaps think of Arendt as an ‘existentialist communitarian.’ Undoubtedly, this seems a contradiction in terms, and suggests what is ultimately the primary problem in Arendt’s thought, and why it is that too often we are left, scratching our heads, asking, ‘What is it that she wants?’” But the rationale for her doing this is, I believe, quite clear: how do we allow for the need for individual expressivism without it going over into either adventure or retreat from the world, while at the same time recognizing that communities must be enabled without giving way the *Volk*-ish encumbrance? Or, we project a sense of existentialism to the world itself, not reining it in at the level of the individual. That is, Arendt tries to view politics as a learning, educative proposition, that is not simply to benefit those in power, nor to shore up the power of the state. Rather, politics brings benefit to the individual, for in engaging politically, the person not only confronts others, but confronts the Self: politics becomes a means by which the individual may find outlets for expression and find ways to ward off the sense of superfluousness.

¹⁶ George Kateb, Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil, Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld. 1983, p. 158

Does Arendt have a politics?

If the central premise is that modernity has generated a feeling of alienation, then it is reasonable to suspect that the path to reclaiming the Self from that alienation is to provide a means for the Self to feel a purpose. Now, there is obviously nothing very new or surprising about such a claim; nor is there even anything surprising to turn to a form of community to provide such a purpose. What is perhaps more interesting is how this might be turned into a political project in and of itself, which is what Arendt attempts to do. And, even more importantly, we must remember that she will do this without reference to ideology. Again, for her, ideology has also failed to ‘care for the world.’

Here is where Arendt becomes a most difficult character with regard to political thought. If she were an historian, or a sociologist—or perhaps even as a philosopher—it might be easier to appreciate what she is trying to achieve. But the purpose here is to engage her distinctly as political. And by this, we should expect a clear answer to the question: ‘If we are to put this into practice, what does the end result look like?’ and in terms of judging whether we think this is a worthwhile political pursuit: ‘Does this end result contribute to human progress?’ And herein lies the problem with Arendt—it is not even that when she gets down to “brass tacks” that her work fails to live up to its promise,¹⁷ and this promise is a noble one indeed. The problem is, as Kateb has identified, that “...she purges politics of too much: She is too pure in her moral and practical exclusions.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Canovan, 1974, op. cit., p. 125

¹⁸ Kateb, 1983. op. cit., p. 29

Pressing even further upon this idea, this purity is, I think, the result of, despite all her intents and purposes, falling into the modern trap of associating progress with hubris, of seeing Tradition and not traditions, and finally, of a failure to clearly distinguish the existential from the political. Her politics, at the end of the day, establishes what very well may be a beautiful means, but is entirely lacking in ends. This is the difficulty with Arendt: there is a very serious disconnect in her thought between political ‘goods’ and political ‘goals.’ To put this differently, while Arendt has a very strong conception of political goods, it is very unclear that she has any conception of political goals.

It is her conception of political goods that keeps drawing us back: it demands a maturity that is all too lacking in so much of what counts as ‘politics’ today. She demands that we withdraw ourselves from the self-indulgent narcissism of ‘authenticity’ while still making a very strong case for the expressive, unique individual. Still, what really is the point of this? Agonal politics without a ‘sounding board’ of ideology can lead to posturing and pettiness, which makes her assumptions of escaping the loneliness of the world dubious. Arendt makes some rather grand assumptions about the goodwill of people, which is very surprising given her distrust of ‘the mass’ and ‘the social.’ Moreover, her politics becomes nothing more than ensuring that one is heard as a Self, or as Bronner has called it, “mere talk.”¹⁹ It may be very nice to learn much about ourselves when we act in public, engaging others, revealing and defending (and perhaps backing down from) our opinions and positions, but it

¹⁹ Stephen Eric Bronner, personal conversation

misses the work of politics. That is, not all political life is either eventful or heroic. Much of it relies upon consistency, of maintenance, even in the face of defeat and regrouping and re-entering the fray. Political life relies perhaps less on the grand gesture than upon a quiet insistence. It is this insistence that will allow us to recognize that

The objective conditions for realizing the unrealized hopes associated with internationalism, liberal democracy, and social justice are already there; only the ideological willingness to embrace the assumptions underpinning these values is lacking.²⁰

I do not doubt that Arendt would support these hopes; but she would certainly not be willing to adopt a strategy by which such goals might come to fruition. What concrete elements of politics does she praise?: councils, the New England town meeting, the 1956 Hungarian Revolutionaries, and the American founding. But this a very selective, perhaps even heroic listing. These were the few, fortuitous moments when natality could be seized. Where, instead, is the day-to-day political life of those who were committed and engaged, but for whom never have the advantages of circumstances lining up, nor of achieving a platform of recognition? Undoubtedly, she is a liberal, and is concerned with the laws and institutions that allow such devices to be possible,²¹ and thus she avoids the truly tragic moment of radical democracy. But her view of these institutions is a highly abstracted one: they can never embrace what she calls the ‘social.’ And it is on

²⁰ Bronner, 2004. op. cit., p. xi

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 59: “The radical democratic alternative is usually seen in terms of atavistic organizational forms like the town meeting or the workers council. It also usually forgotten that these movements have always presupposed the existence of a state with liberal norms and that their success has been largely dependent in their ability to use the courts and pressure for legislation. The liberal state remains the point of reference for movements committed to social change and for those interested in the protection of civil liberties.”

the crux of this ‘social’ that we will see her politics become a purified, rarefied, educative device, rather than a device that articulates a program for improving the lot of others.

What I want to draw attention to is that her political theory does not easily attach itself to what may be considered the purpose of progressive politics: that of improving the lot of the marginalized. But perhaps the most tragic theme—the one that Arendt cannot get past—is that ‘ideological’ positions can no longer be useful for political projects. It is here that Arendt’s confusion with regard to the political self as opposed to the existential self emerges. This confusion over the domain of these two selves is what makes her thought so messy and is the greatest difficulty to overcome in her work. That is, when we confuse the existential self for the political self, politics becomes less about structure, organization and the struggle for the ‘best society.’ Instead, what takes its place—and here I think Arendt is blind—is expressivism. For Arendt, rather than seeing ideology as a freely-chosen position that represents my choices about the ‘best society,’ of what I wish to attach myself to in order to see my principles and interests met, ‘ideological’ thinking is instead an inhibition upon my finding and recognizing myself as a *zoon politikon*. The political self, as it shall be used here, is a quest to find one’s public voice—a voice that can be shared, but more importantly, understood by other actors. It is a self that is unencumbered by sentiment and emotion, by *ad hominem* arguments, or by arguments based on specificity or identity. In other words, this political self speaks the language of universalizable arguments. This, of course, is the self Arendt wishes to privilege.

She will impose the model of the ‘good citizen’—an abstracted, ‘purified’ version of the political Self, but, at the same moment, she will advocate that only by entering the public sphere can we acknowledge our existential Self. One is perhaps tempted to suggest that this is Arendt’s way of hinting that the existential Self is but a mirage, that once we meet collectively, we recognize that this angst of the existential is nothing more than narcissism or the pathos of interiority. Arendt takes the modern condition far too seriously to make such a simple-minded argument. Instead of dismissal of the existential, what I see as present is an attempt at containment, to recognize that the existential is always in a dialogue with the political, but that, if we are to care for the world, the existential must always be subordinated to the political. But without acknowledging the ideological frameworks in which such a Self may play out, we move no further ahead in containing the expressive, existential Self.



The primary concern of this essay is to examine how Arendt develops the ideas of self and community as they apply to political life. As such, I shall privilege Arendt’s explicitly political works—those where she examines concrete political events and themes—and of how she uses these themes to address the ‘modern crisis.’ Arendt, as addressed earlier, is looking for ways to prevent human superfluousness; for ways of structuring politics in such a way that human agency is both the final outcome and the central motive force. Each of the

following chapters, which follow her works chronologically, will demonstrate how the categories of self and community in relation to political life are thematically developed. The culmination of this will be to examine her central political device, the public sphere. Finally, I shall discuss the problems inherent to thinking about politics without recourse to ideology.

Love and Saint Augustine: The Abstracted Neighbor

In her dissertation, Arendt establishes the problematic that will continue throughout her later works: she minimizes the neighbor. In her analysis of Augustine, she claims that Augustinian love is premised not on the neighbor as he is, but rather, on the promise of what that neighbor may become. This focus on the futurity, as opposed to the present, of the neighbor, reappears when we examine her distinction between the 'good citizen' and the 'good man' in *On Revolution*, and is what she will encourage in developing the 'public sphere.' Moreover, the futurity of the neighbor, as developed in *Love and Saint Augustine*, requires a purification of the neighbor, for we are loving his potential. Her neighbor—the citizen—is that around which community is built: as an abstracted, purified promise of potential, 'care for the world' too becomes abstracted and purified. 'Care for the world' has less to do with the people living in it than with the development of a neighbor we can love.

Rahel Varnhagen: The Strangeness of Me

In this chapter, I shall draw attention to what I believe is Arendt's greatest concern with the possibilities of an existentialist mindset: it can easily turn to Romanticism, and with Romanticism, a misanthropic retreat from the world. Rahel Varnhagen falls into the trap of the 'spectacle of inner life,' a trap which the modern condition has made seductive. For in the modern condition, we are given the promise of possessing a unique individuality. The danger, however, as summed by the example of Rahel Varnhagen, is that it can lead to a state in which we fail to recognize our similarities to others. And thus Arendt wants to caution us, that the excesses of the individual promoted by modern reason can lead to an excess of privacy, wherein we reject the world because we feel it denies us expression of the Self. This is, for Arendt, a perversion of the intent of individual freedom and reason. Instead, we need to recognize that two 'individuals' are present in each person: the private and the public, and that it is the public individual that can properly enter political life.

The Origins of Totalitarianism: A Surfeit of Superfluosity

In this, her political magnum opus, Arendt provides an analysis of the phenomenon of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism. Her analysis rests on the examination of the rise of racism and of imperialism: totalitarianism appears as a narcissistic, racialized, nation-state. It is in this structure that I find an indication

of the resistance to 'grand narrative,' that the Western tradition has failed to become a 'question unto itself,' and, blinded by a utilitarian accounting of Progress, accepts totalitarianism as a rational move. This analysis establishes two points that are central to my discussion. The first is that of Arendt's accounting of human 'superfluosity': it is not just existential angst encourages a sense of superfluosity, but political structures can concretely make people become superfluous. Arendt is quite right in identifying this as the most significant danger of modernity, and of course, it is the reason for which she will advocate the public sphere as remedy. However, while her identification of superfluosity is well justified, her reason for the inability to resist is not. For, in her accounting of totalitarianism, she makes what I see as the fatal mistake in her larger project: the dismissal of ideology. This will be the second theme drawn from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She has structured the phenomenon of totalitarianism as the result of the Western Tradition; ideologies, for her, are encompassed within this. Ideologies thus become a further way of blinding us to the human condition, acting as 'banisters' that direct thought, rather than allowing us to think freely. Ideologies thus become a form of modern 'banalization.' But this is a rather narrow reading of 'ideology,' for she is here throwing all political traditions into one pot, failing to recognize that ideologies can be viewed as either 'progressive' or 'reactionary.' Throwing all ideologies together this way will prove to be the greatest impediment to her theory: without ideology, we cannot translate political goods into political goals.

Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Crisis of Conscience

Eichmann in Jerusalem is rightly famous for introducing us to the idea of the 'banality of evil.' What is expressed here is, of course, that Eichmann cannot possibly be perceived as some sort of monster. What is crucial is to recognize not that Eichmann himself is a 'banal' character, but that we can all become banal by failing to heed the Augustinian *quaestio*: "I have become a question unto myself." It is only by engaging in this self-reflexive questioning that we evade the modern compulsion to 'discipline.' In this book, Arendt points time and again to the missed opportunity to place oneself in 'care of the world.' Whether Eichmann himself, the Jewish Councils, Israel, or any of the nations that cooperated in the Holocaust, all fall victim to the same 'banality': the failure to engage in the unexpected, the failure to grasp what is outside their narrow frame of reference. Modernity here is portrayed as having demanded 'appropriate' responses, even to those situations in which no appropriate response can even be considered. We, as a culture, have become banal because of this narrowed focus, the loss of the ability to question. We have, in other words, lost our ability to exercise that most fundamental of human traits: conscience.

On Revolution: The Fragility of Rights

The purpose for which *On Revolution* is used in this study is to explicate Arendt's concern with political rights. Rights, for her, are part of this man-made, artificial

world; we thus have a responsibility to care for and maintain political rights. However, what Arendt considers an 'appropriate' right for our care is clouded by her concern with 'the social': when the social creeps into the field of concern, political rights are destabilized. The introduction of this idea of 'the social' raises some very serious concerns about exactly what Arendt will accept as 'political,' as well as whom she will accept as political actors: she is quite scathing with regard to the poor and their concerns. Because of this concern with 'the social,' she will make a distinction between the 'good man' and the 'good citizen'—an echo of her Augustinian neighbor. She will limit the political to the abstracted concerns of the citizen, and, for her, it is only when we can overcome the messiness of everyday interests that we might be able to be 'appropriately' engaged. Much as she articulated a purified neighbor of futurity in Love and Saint Augustine, here she reasons that we must sacrifice 'man' to 'citizen.' Her reasons for doing this are of special importance to our larger discussion. Where she makes this distinction of citizen contra man, is where, I believe, she is marking the boundaries of explicitly political life off from that of the existential.

Arendt's Public Sphere: Locating a Political Existential

In this chapter, I shall tie the various threads developed in earlier chapters together examining Arendt's public sphere. Arendt uses the public sphere not just as a political device but also as an existential one. As she describes it, the public sphere is what will insure humanity's home in the world, and it through

participation in the public sphere that individuals may overcome their sense of superfluousness. By entering the activity of the public sphere, individuals not only comment upon the world, but are forced into reflexive communication with the Other. In this 'light of publicity,' each will learn not only about the Other, but also about themselves. They will, in other words, be required to engage the Augustinian *quaestio* and be pushed beyond banality. The public sphere is where we develop our 'common love' of the world. But this 'common love' or care for the world will be equated with politics in and of itself: the politics of the community is to ensure that politics shall be able to continue into the future.

As we piece together the various parts of Arendt's public sphere, what I find is a community that acts to restrain the excesses of the existential, 'social' Self. The purpose of the public sphere is less to achieve political goals, but to produce political goods. The boundaries of the public sphere, premised as it is on the 'good citizen' act to be instructive, to remind us of the need to avoid banality. The existential Self can very well be experienced, but can never become a distinctly political actor in his own right. Rather, this existential element is reminded to remain at the level of the social. However, as I shall argue, Arendt does this in order to replace the 'thrill' of existential adventure with a rich political existence. That is, she attempts to substitute the yearning of existentialism into an expressly political domain: 'We (not I) have become a question unto ourselves.' This, ultimately, is her response to the crisis of modernity. By shifting the *quaestio* to the collective, we are asking about the sort of culture in which we exist.

The Encumbrance of *History*

As a resolution to the modern condition, Arendt's public sphere is highly problematic. While undoubtedly, there is a certain sense to it: the existential crisis of modernity does require some sort of grounding, some sort of device to prevent slipping into angst and superfluity, and in that regard, her public sphere does perhaps succeed. But does it respond to what we need in political terms? This, I think, is much more questionable, for, the only device present in this public sphere is the entering into speech-acts. This is what I mean when I say she has a theory of political goods. Undoubtedly, her public sphere suggests a rather civilized and educative political community. But at the end of the day, it is morality, instructive as to how we should behave in political community. But what are the outcomes, the goals: that we get to know our neighbors, and Fox News is pulled from the air? Surely Arendt wants more, as do I.

What prevents her political thought from the ability to engage with goals? I think the answer is quite simple, but one that, unfortunately, has permeated so much of political thought coming out of modernity: she must necessarily reject teleological History; but in doing so, she has elided the Tradition (or History) with traditions of political thought. She fails to distinguish between the 'grand narrative' approach to that of political traditions articulating the principles and interests of historically situated people. She sees these traditions—ideologies—as positing schematic endpoints, which, once achieved, puts an end to politics itself. Humanity, hence, will no longer be able to engage in a self-creation.

But this, unfortunately, misses the point. Political traditions are based around concerns generated by historical conditions; they are attempts to respond to the world. Most importantly, what ideologies provide are ‘sounding boards’ that act as reflective moments of judgment by allowing us to keep in mind what are our political goals. We should also note that political goals need not necessarily adopt a ‘grand narrative’ character; much more likely, we are to use these goals to consider whether a particular action advances the principle of said ideological position. Without such focus on goals, we shall end up in the situation of ‘mere talk,’ or perhaps even worse, a world without any sort of intelligible meaning. Without ideology—traditions—in which to hang our opinions, all opinion becomes self-referential, and the ability to build solidarity—even for such an abstract notion as that of safeguarding humanity—will be happenstance at best. This is the attractive trap, into which, I believe, Arendt ultimately falls.

Chapter One

Love and Saint Augustine: The Abstracted Neighbor

This chapter examines Arendt's dissertation, *Love and St. Augustine*. The dissertation's addition to the Arendtian oeuvre represents more than mere desire for completion, but rather, "...grounds her political thought and provides the existential context for her phenomenology of public life..."¹ My focus in this chapter is to draw out the themes of "care for the world," and "love for the neighbor" that emerge in the dissertation and that shall act as binding agents in Arendt's thought. Examination of the dissertation shows these themes as politically problematic, however, for both "care for the world" and "love of the neighbor," as Arendt develops them here, rely on an abstraction into the future. And in this we find the dissonance that runs throughout Arendt's work: she wants to impose upon people a type of similarity—a similarity of futurity—which may be all well and good philosophically speaking, but is highly suspect, if not outrageous when brought into the political realm.

The core argument here is that, in *Love and St. Augustine*, Arendt exchanges neighbor-love in the present for the love of the futurity of the neighbor. Arendt's reading of the neighbor thus radically alters Augustine's political thought,

¹ Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, "Rediscovering Hannah Arendt," in Hannah Arendt, *Love and St. Augustine*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 1929/1996. p. 172

moving us away from the material, experiential, self and other of Augustinian texts, towards an abstracted, decontextualized, neighbor: Arendt's Augustinian neighbor lacks a reflexive connection with the concrete. In so doing, she fatally strips away all that makes us human, taking away the rich and dialectical experience of life that is at the core of the Augustinian project. Individuals and individual experience, through the equality of death, become interchangeable with one another. Thus, in her configuration of neighborly love, it is not the concrete manifestation of the neighbor whom we love, but rather, an abstracted and minimized neighbor. It is a neighbor who does not possess individual qualities, nor one who exists in the world: we lose the ability to respect and appreciate the neighbor, for we see him not as a whole being, but only as that part which has the potential to be perfected. Respect for the other would thus lie in the breadth and depth of the perfection of the other, not in any sort of sense of who he is as an individual.

This situating of the neighbor as a perfectible being has serious implications for the possibilities of a "care for the world", for it becomes a world populated by none in particular. This is ironic, given Arendt's concerns for reclaiming the world from History or Tradition, to make the world a place "fit for men to live":

But aside from the pain and the consequences, alienation is to be lamented as the wrong condition to be in. The largely unargued premise is that the human race exists in order to be at home in the world and on earth; that our humanity is tied to the absence of alienation—at least, the radical alienation in the modern age...Let us just say that though she is adamantly untheological, Arendt seems to have a religious commitment to

the notion that we exist to be at home in the world and on the earth, and that human identity depends on it.²

But when we look at the character and qualities of the men that are to live in this world, we shall see that they are not any who are of this world, and in this respect, she moves us far away from Augustine.

Arendt's Augustinian roots

The modern dilemma in which Arendt situates herself is that of "...being lost in a world otherwise totally explained."³ But for Arendt, writing her dissertation against the backdrop of 1920s Germany, this idea of a 'world totally explained' is absurd. Even worse than absurd, the 'world totally explained' is a lie, if not hubris. The world had not just been turned upside down, but rather, laid bare: all 'reason' was a lie; all 'ideology' broken; political apparatus suspect. All that can apparently be relied upon is my own experience. But this is neither optimistic nor hopeful, faithful in the Hegelian progress of history: experience is broken, cynical, horrified by the past and suspicious of the future.

How appropriate then that Arendt should turn to Augustine. Like Augustine's Rome, Western Civilization no longer seems capable of containing the pressures imposed upon it from within and without. The Augustinian *quaestio* —of becoming a question unto oneself—takes on an urgency again, not only

² George Kateb, Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld. 1983, p. 158

³ Hannah Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy?" (1946), in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Jerome Kohn, ed. New York: Schocken Books. 1994, p 173

because it addresses the alienation of the Self the modern world, but because the world has itself become a question. Arendt will use the existentialist Augustinian *quaestio*, centered on love-of-neighbor, as the referent point for addressing the dilemma of the modern. This, I posit, is the central theme throughout her works: How do we, as moderns, engage in allowing the world to remain a question unto itself, rather than revert to thinking all is explained?

Let us tread carefully here. Arendt is not about to use Augustine to support some sort of return to Christian charity or reliance on ‘grace.’ She is, despite some of her pretences and misgivings, undoubtedly a modern, insofar that she views the world as something that is in the hands of man and man alone. That is the point: we create the world in which we live. But in order to create such a world, we must remain open to possibility, and hence open to the sort of open-ended questioning and searching for which Augustine provides a framework. His *quaestio* is horizonless and pitiless. And, moreover, the only possible response to Augustine’s *quaestio* is to engage in a type of radical love, the love of *caritas*. *Caritas* demands a willingness not only to engage in the harsh glare of self-reflection, but to knowingly enter into relationships fraught with a lack of determinism; it is a love that is neither self-abnegating nor self-fulfilling. In Arendt’s reading, Augustinian *caritas* becomes the means by which conscience can engage the world.⁴ Perhaps the Augustinian appeal—again recalling the backdrop of Weimar—is best summed up by Jean Bethke Elshtain’s synopsis:

⁴ Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, 1996, op. cit. p. 151

Augustine displays the negative of ideology by articulating a canny and scrupulous attunement to the here and now with its very real limits. There *are* affirmations that flow from his negation of positive philosophy. Augustine creates a complex moral map that offers space for loyalty and love and care, as well as for a chastened form of civic virtue. If Augustine is a thorn in the side of those who would cure the universe once and for all, he similarly torments cynics who would disdain any project of human community, or justice, or possibility...Wisdom comes from experiencing fully the ambivalence and ambiguity that is the human condition.⁵

And here is why Arendt makes this most interesting turn to Augustine, but specifically, an existentialist Augustine: he is no stranger to the virtues of both angst and community; of the need to embrace the *wholeness* rather than the partiality of human existence. And in this, Arendt finds a philosophical 'kindred spirit,' with whom she might engage a process of "unsystematic; new beginn[ing]s."⁶ The approach I thus want to take is that Arendt will view the radical release of Being as being balanced within the complicated, messy humanity of being-with-others: hers is never to be an 'heroic' and isolated Being, but rather a Being fraught with all the neuroses that come from living amidst a world populated with other Beings. Arendt and Augustine, then, are both beginners in the sense of trying to come to find home in a 'new world.'

First and foremost, we must remember that Augustine was not only a thinker and institutionalizer of the Christian faith, but he also stood on the precipice of a new stage of Western Civilization. The glory of Rome was under attack and crumbling rapidly from without; a Rome perceived to have lost its former verisimilitude, now corrupted by decadence and licentiousness.

⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. 1995, p. 91

⁶ Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 122

Augustine must thus be remembered as a *critic* of Rome, but specifically critical of the ways in which 'Roman virtue' had lost its sense of having a common purpose, and had instead turned into the vacuous exercise of meeting appearances. Indeed, for Augustine, the Roman world was crumbling because it had given up the very thing that had distinguished it: its vigorous civic culture. What remained of Rome was a population who were "...without the tradition and guidance of a just social order, [and] lack[ing] the public standards necessary to exercise their freedom in a public world."⁷ The Roman citizen, in other words, was no longer truly a 'citizen' in the sense of having an active role to play in the political life of the Empire. There was a disconnect between people and place, and Augustine aims to offer "...an alternative explanation of their place - individual, social, and political - within the world of man, the *saeculum*."⁸ And it is in this context that his existential pursuit will lie. He aims, in his explicitly *political* aspect, to bring about the relevance of public action and common purpose⁹ as the basis for structuring the City of Men. As such, Augustine asks us to query and judge that which we propose as the 'good,' the ways in which we shall organize and articulate our common world. But to do this, we must turn away from abstractions and tradition, relying instead upon our own judgment of how to 'practice' a life.¹⁰

⁷ Peter Dennis Bathory, *Political Theory as Public Confession: The Social and Political Thought of St. Augustine of Hippo*. Transaction Books: New Brunswick (USA) and London (UK). 1981. p. 139

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 4

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5

¹⁰ Eugene TeSelle, *Living in Two Cities: Augustinian Trajectories in Political Thought*, Scranton: University of Scranton Press. 1998 p. 106

The complicating factor, though, and what brings this into the realm of existentialism is that, of course, of Augustine's Christianity. For in the City of Men, the Christian references the City of God as a moral standpoint. Here is the inherent moment of angst, for

The Gospel can never be at home in the world, and cannot fail to bring a true believer into conflict with any existing order of things. It is in essential and permanent tension with the world. This tension should be a fruitful one, from which awkward questions are continually being put into the world. Hope is a permanently unsettling force, seeking to prevent social institutions from becoming rigid and fixed, always inclined to treat the *status quo* with suspicion.¹¹

And thus, here is where the angst of Augustine enters, and we must take extreme care to note a qualitative difference with Arendtian angst. For Augustine, angst is generated from a longing for God, and in particular a longing to live a life in the City of God, but knowing full well that this is an impossibility here on Earth. Judgment of how one should live thus always refers back to what we perceive to be God-like. But this judging perception is necessarily always incomplete. Our angst is built upon a longing for God, but never having the ability to fully possess God: so long as we exist in the City of Men, we shall never find comfort, but shall always be in a state of angst. But this angst for Augustine is a productive and hopeful state. It is precisely this tension, this angst that allows one to become a question unto oneself.

As Eugene TeSelle has argued, Arendt seems to lose track of this fundamental tension in Augustine, for "...she distrusts the willing subject, whose horizon will always be wider than what is willed. The danger, of course, is that

¹¹ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1970. pp. 168-69

the willed community, the only object of loyalty that is at hand, will become a kind of finite deity.”¹² Indeed, as we have seen, her angst is situated entirely within the world of men. Without God, there is no moment of external reflection for the existential questioning of oneself, and hence the willed community, it seems, *must* become the deity. But such is the nature of living as a modern. Thus there is a material distinction between the angst of Augustine and the angst of Arendt, in which the Arendtian perspective must accommodate the tension of existence without recourse to an external that can help guide us through the questioning of oneself. Arendt is trying to deal with an existential Augustine that is without God.

Augustinian existentialism

Setting aside the philosophical issue of whether one can fully embrace Augustine without reference to God, I believe that Augustine does indeed offer a method of approaching political life, but only so long as the role which God plays in terms of this politics is appreciated and understood. Undoubtedly, no modern would want to situate God within a model of politics. The question, however, for those seeking in Augustine an approach to politics, is whether the place of God can be appropriately secularized for modern life. My position is that Arendt will miss this mark; she eliminates God in both divine and secular forms. But first, we must situate God within Augustine’s existential enterprise.

¹² Eugene TeSelle, 1998, op. cit. pp. 159-60

Peter Dennis Bathory presents Augustine offering a model of “a therapy of self-examination” in which Augustine himself is an exemplar.¹³ The purpose of this *therapeia* is not some sort of retreat from the world in narcissistic self-contemplation, but quite the opposite:

His aim is to awaken hope in his reader, even as he speaks despairingly of his own youthful corruption. Augustine’s examination of his own life thus becomes an example. Careful self-examination of the sort that Augustine demonstrates in his *Confessions* will lead people to discover both the limits of human action and the great – though often unperceived – potential of the human will and of human action in this world.¹⁴

Augustine is trying to address the humanity of honest searching, a humanity that must struggle with life in all its complexity, in all the tensions between secular and holy life. What is striking here in the *therapeia* of Augustine is that the Self becomes the crucible of the truth of God.

For Augustine, It is not enough to be taught the truth from ‘on high.’ Rather, our coming to terms with this truth, from our perspective in the temporal, material world, is an absolute necessity for gaining access to the truth of God. While *The Confessions* teaches us that the self is the crucible in which the truth of God can be realized and recognized in this material realm, this can only ever be a partial truth: God remains unknowable in His infinity. An “authentic” love of God, then, must always be fraught with tension, imperfect and incomplete. The best we can do, then, is to look to God as a reference, to learn, via this therapeutic self-reflection, what it means to love God and live in accordance with his grace.

¹³ Peter Dennis Bathory, 1981, op. cit. p. 7

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 37

The God of Augustine then is what I shall characterize as a transcendent God. More precisely, I wish to bring attention to how this transcendent God differs from what I shall call an immanent God. To think of God as immanent is to imply a truth that has a permanent presence; the truth of God can be fully recognized and defined. Immanence waits for an uncovering rather than for an experiencing. Thus, an immanent God is a God who waits only for our discovery of Him. As immanent, God becomes a dogmatic figure: we only need to be told the truth of God, and accept it. But this also implies a passivity, for if we are placed in a position where we are simply to be taught God's truth, we need not seek out our own relationship to God. We cannot be the question unto ourselves, for we have already been told the answers.

More important to the larger project, however, is what immanence here suggests in relation to the search for truth. Striving to recognize an immanent God insinuates perfectibility, and perfectibility, the ability to come to full knowledge. The struggle that centers Augustine's thought, that of the tension of living in a world without God, is minimized. The immanent God is not a personally experienced God, but rather one of dictates and dogma: there is a perfected way of being out there, and it is our duty to follow that model, no questions asked. It is not for us to know God, but rather to accept God. And, as such, the mystery that is God is removed, for, in such a model, so long as we listen to the correct authority, we shall know the correct way to live. When we move into a world that is only immanent, we move into a world 'totally explained.'

Obviously, then, Augustine's God is not an immanent God, but rather a transcendent God, a God that is external to our immediate knowledge. Perhaps counterintuitively, a transcendent God is one that ensures human experience. While one may be able to 'experience' an immanent God via a moment of religious revelation, experiencing the God of Augustine requires an engagement with the material world, of learning via our constant negotiation of the pain and beauty of existence and reflection thereof. We understand something in its 'thingness.' We come to God, then, not because we have been told that this is the nature of His being. Rather, we come to recognize the nature of his being. It is less that we learn what is 'good', or right and wrong, but rather, we sense a discord, an inauthenticity within ourselves. Desire leads me to search for a remedy for such discord; self-reflection—*therapia*—asks me to reach past the immediate self to try to rectify this discomfort I experience in myself.

Recognizing God thus permits us a means to transcend the dissonance within ourselves. But perhaps more importantly, this dialectical motion within myself permits me to see God as a mediator in my own life. Or, to put it differently, God has entered my life in a *personal* way: He has become a part of *my own experience*. He has become authentic to me. If God is not understood in this individual, experiential way, God is a meaningless being. Obviously, this is not something I can experience through the blind following of precepts and rules. This would equate with an inauthentic experience of God. This is the experiential core of Augustine.

The transcendental God of Augustine is thus one that permits the world to remain a mystery, open-ended. Moreover, it is one that will always privilege human experience—in this sense of questioning, of self-reflection, of *therapia* as central to our life in this world. To impose immanence here would jeopardize the very things that make us human. But most of all, this transcendental, experiential God allows us to make possibility, not perfectibility, axiomatic:

The believing hope will itself provide *inexhaustible resources* for the creative, inventive imagination of love. It constantly provokes and produces thinking of an anticipatory kind in love to man and the world, in order to give shape to the newly dawning possibilities in the light of the promised future, in order as far as possible to create here the best that is possible, because what is promised is within the bounds of possibility. Thus it will constantly arouse the ‘passion for the possible’, inventiveness and elasticity in self-transformation, in breaking with the old and coming to terms with the new.¹⁵

Augustinian love

Augustine’s conception of love is complex and layered, consisting of three categories of love—*appetitus*, *cupiditas*, and *caritas*. It is by working through these varieties of love that Arendt is able to come to the conclusion that love-of-neighbor is that which holds the Augustinian system together.

...the innermost core of will is love. Love is a striving for something I have not...Love is desire, where it strives for possession of the beloved; it is joy, where it possesses; it is fear, where it sees its possession threatened and flees the assailant; it is grief, where it suffers loss. Love is all-encompassing, embracing things and persons, objects of thought and corporeal realities.¹⁶

¹⁵ R. A. Markus, 1970, op. cit., p. 170

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Plato and Augustine*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1957/1962, p. 95

Central to the Augustinian structuring of love is love as *appetitus*, which Arendt will also label ‘desire’ or ‘craving.’ This craving is something that all are subject to, for “...Augustine defines life itself by what it craves. Life craves the goods occurring in the world, and thus turns itself into one of them only to find out that things (*res*), if compared to life, are of almost sempiternal permanence.”¹⁷

Two things are of importance here. The first is that craving requires an object. It is not free-floating as some sort of subconscious psychological drive (though that may be part of what objects we respond to) but rather is subjectively experienced. Thus, desire becomes a phenomenon of existence, much like eating or sleeping. It is simply *there*, and it is up to each person to fill in what is desired, that which one wants to move toward or to possess. The object of one’s desire can never be pre-determined. This leads to the second aspect to be noted about craving: insofar that craving is a phenomena of existence, it is a sensation that each and every person experiences. Thus, there is a fundamental commonality to be found here as each person defines and attempts to move toward the object of his desire. Each of us, then, is capable of experiencing love. Each of us knows what it is to attempt to move toward, to long for, some object that is not yet in our grasp. Each of us will know the pain of longing and the joy of possessing. Love—in this abstract, psychological sense—becomes the experiential commonality of our collective existence.

The Confessions is a detailed observance of Augustine’s struggles with the varieties of objects of his craving. *The Confessions*, acting as a model,

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, 1929/1996, op. cit., p. 17

teaches that the objects one desires—and the emotions one experiences in the wake of these desires—leave a mark upon the man. Augustine recognizes the immediacy of desire, and the thrill of gratification that comes with possessing the object of one's desire. But—and here is where Augustine's *quaestio* emerges—the objects which one craves exert powerful forces on one's experience of life itself. Augustine will thus go on to classify and, more importantly, *order* the types of love which we may experience. Building from this most basic abstract form—which Arendt will identify as “craving”—Augustine goes on to develop the loves of *cupiditas* and *caritas*. And, as we might expect from Augustine, the growth of the man depends upon his ability to reflect upon, to mediate, the dialectic dynamic of the loves of *cupiditas* and of *caritas*.

The love of *cupiditas* is, for Augustine, a lower-ordered love: it is the love of the world and its earthly pleasures. But many objects in the world—an ill-begotten pear, the rush of watching the gladiator fights—are of insipid quality. While they might provide a thrill at the moment, when he inquires into the reasons for that thrill, he finds an illusory happiness. It is a thrill that is fleeting, that depends upon seeking out further ‘thrills.’ These desires, in effect, lead one out of the richness of life, instead leading to a life wholly dependent upon the hurly-burly of the outside world.

Of course, for Augustine, *cupiditas* is not without its charms. In thinking about Augustine, we must not forget that he was highly amused by the world. He delighted in the oddities and wonders of humanity. We cannot forget that Augustine, in addition to being the ‘Doctor of the Church,’ also delighted in the

secular world, had a deep understanding of the appeal of such secular delights, and was most certainly not above playing power games when it came to matters of establishing the Church.¹⁸ *Cupiditas*, in other words, is not a love to be denied outright. *Cupiditas*, despite its temperamental, fleeting qualities, is a relevant and necessary aspect of human existence.

Augustine counters *cupiditas* with the love of *caritas*. As with *cupiditas*, *caritas* is filled with the longing of desire. But instead of the objects of our love being those of the fleeting thrills of the world, *caritas* strives to love that which provides a lasting happiness. *The Confessions* reveals that the love of *caritas* is essential to the development of being a 'question unto oneself,' for *caritas* "...demands autonomy in that it is a love that must be freely and unconditionally given. It must permit an evergrowing commitment to other people. It is dedicated to the good of all, to the common weal."¹⁹ It is the higher-ordered love that will move us toward the right objects of our love, that "...offers support for both self-love and the love of God. It serves the immediate goals of human action in the *saeculum* as well as the more distant goal of eternal peace."²⁰ *Caritas*, then, becomes not only an ideal on which we order our desires, but becomes foundational to the Augustinian political project in that

Augustine came to see *caritas* as both the source of political morality and the heart of true philosophy...The affection of *caritas* promotes unity and harmony. Whereas, the passionate longing of *cupiditas* promotes disunity and confusion. *Cupiditas* is a bad love in that it consumes all that it touches, possessively denying the individuality and integrity of other

¹⁸ see, for example, *The Augustinian Putsch in Africa*, in James J. O'Donnell, "Augustine: A New Biography," New York: Harper Collins. 2005, pp. 209-243.

¹⁹ Peter Dennis Bathory, 1981, op. cit., p. 82

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 85

people, and fearfully and enviously holding on to material possessions. It is divisive because it never allows people to develop those genuine bonds of affection that flow from reciprocal commitment. It is privatizing because it promotes the jealous defense of material possessions. *Caritas* - in every respect – reverses the tendencies of *cupiditas*.²¹

Of course, for Augustine, the ultimate right object is that of God and of trying to create, as best we can, a City of God here on Earth. What is important to note here is that Augustine is under no illusions about the City of God: it can rightfully only be found in the hereafter. To establish the City of God in concrete form, in the present and for the future, would be a fool's quest, even a heresy. The best that can possibly be achieved here on earth is a wan approximation. But the City of God can be lived as a desire, as a model, as something to hold in one's heart. We can, in other words, live according to the love of *caritas*, and, using *caritas* as a guide, structure our society accordingly. This will, as we shall see, lead to an emphasis on the love of the neighbor and of 'finding the objects of our common love'. However, before getting too carried away with these premises, we need also to recognize that the society of *caritas* is not something that is simply to be institutionalized in order to be practiced. *Caritas* instead continues the theme of Augustine's existentialism: it is not a lived discipline, but is something we desire to experience. That is, *caritas* is a love we attempt to incorporate into our personal existence; it is "...not moralistic self-abnegation but an abundant overflowing of the fullness of life."²² Moreover, "*Caritas* demands autonomy in that it is a love that must be freely and unconditionally given. It must

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 82

²² Jean Bethke Elshtain, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 36

permit an ever-growing commitment to other people. It is dedicated to the good of all, to the common weal.”²³

And here we see the distinctive difficulties emerging from Augustine’s socio-political thought: the Self must remain intact, but can never turn to an inwardness. To be a Self in the Augustinian sense is to experience life in the company of others; to continually return to the *quaestio* in my interactions with others; to continually learn how to develop the love of *caritas*. But, as this *quaestio* is open-ended for every one of us, that I must concern myself with the fact of humanity’s imperfectibility—of *my own* imperfectibility—there will always be an incompleteness, a sense of frustration, of angst, with my society. We must consciously search for the “objects of common love” that will hold our society together.

This is, of course, complicated by the fact that we are bound by human perception:

...the virtues which the mind imagines it possesses, by means of which it rules the body and the vicious elements, are themselves vices rather than virtues, if the mind does not bring them into relation with God in order to achieve anything whatsoever and to maintain that achievement. For although virtues are reckoned by some people to be genuine and honorable when they are related only to themselves and are sought for no other end...[they] are to be accounted vices rather than virtues.²⁴

Let us recall that for Augustine, a large part of the beauty of humanity is its very fallibility. We are creatures full of desires, desires that are, very often (in Augustine’s opinion) dangerous to the care of the soul (the desire of *cupiditas*).

²³ Peter Dennis Bathory, 1981, op. cit., p. 82

²⁴ Saint Augustine, *City of God*, Henry Bettenson, trans., London and New York: Penguin Books. 1972 XIX, 25

But these potentially dangerous desires are the core of our human condition, that give our time in the temporal realm its meaning: our human struggle, caught between base material desire and the quest for God's truth, is the heart of human existence. To truly show the love of *caritas* is to accept and love even that which is base in human desires.²⁵ Negotiating the materiality of the world and the truth of God is a dialectic, a dialectic motion that places the self as mediator: base desire can teach the self about the truth of God; God's truth can teach the self about the temptation of desire. But never can the proper objects of our love be imposed. Likewise, the care of the soul cannot tolerate imposed notions of the good: to do so would be a negation of one's authentic quest for the care of the soul. One must always remain a question; without the question, we enter into God-territory: God will always stand outside of society, acting as a beacon to guide us.

The question for both Augustine and Arendt is one of locating objects of common love, and how we are to know that these are, indeed, the right objects of our love. Obviously, if we are to find the objects of our *common* love, each needs to transcend his own realm of material desires, his realm of *cupiditas*. And here, the theme of the love of the neighbor emerges as what draws Arendt to Augustine. However, the neighbor that emerges in Arendt's work is not the neighbor of Augustine: it is not the neighbor of this world, but a neighbor abstracted into the future. This abstracted neighbor will have its role to play as we further discuss Arendt's political thought, and will raise significant difficulties

²⁵ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1980, pp. 31-32

with regard to how we might ‘care for the world’.

The love of the neighbor

The neighbor holds a place of particular importance in Augustine’s socio-political organization, and this importance rests on a duality: the relation to the neighbor is how we might come to establish a society centered on the objects of common love *as well as* the object which mediates my personal experience of *caritas*. Hence, as Oliver O’Donovan has noted, “...love-of-neighbor-as-self is a maximal, not a minimal, standard.”²⁶ For Augustine, it is precisely because we know ourselves that we can recognize the neighbor, but to do this, we must be in the present, experiencing materiality; if one cannot recognize the self, one will likewise lose the possibility of responsible engagement with the neighbor. Hence, the Augustinian community is premised on two commandments: Love God and Love Your Neighbor as Yourself.²⁷ When these commandments are understood, then we can begin to situate the community as “...the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of its love”.²⁸

It is Arendt’s interpretation of the neighbor that I focus on here, for this, I believe, is the pathway into her political thought. The neighbor, in her

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 118

²⁷ Peter Dennis Bathory, 1981, *op. cit.*, p. 28

²⁸ Saint Augustine, *City of God*, *op. cit.* XIX, 24

dissertation, loses his materiality, his role as mediator between the Self and God.

Rather, Arendt sketches a portrait of the *potentiality* of the neighbor:

The attitude of individuals toward each other is characterized here by belief, as distinguished from all real or potential knowledge...This belief in the other is the belief that he will prove himself in our common future. Every earthly city depends upon this proof. Yet this belief that arises from our mutual interdependence precedes any possible proof.²⁹

But how then, might this line up with the idea of seeing the community as those who share a 'common agreement on the objects of its love'? For what Arendt seems to suggest here is that the commonality is not to be found in anything tangible, such as institutions or procedures, but rather, in terms of holding a belief in what may yet come to be. This is a rather curious proposal for her to make, given that Augustine is always ever-so-conscious of the angst provoked by the fact that we reside in this earthly realm, yet long for a life in the Heavenly City. Indeed, it seems that Arendt's interpretation of Augustinian love is one that denies the expression of *cupiditas*, that *cupiditas* has no place in the mediation of the Self.

The prerequisite of the right comprehension of my neighbor is the right comprehension of myself. It is only where I have made sure of the truth of my own being that I can love my neighbor in his true being, which is in his createdness. And just as I do not love the self I made in belonging to the world, I also do not love my neighbor in the concrete and worldly encounter with him. Rather, I love him in his createdness. I love something in him, that is, the very thing which, of himself, he is not...³⁰

What we have here, I believe, demonstrates a loss of the role of *cupiditas* in the Augustinian framework. For what is suggested in the preceding is not the reflexive model of growth and struggle toward *caritas* through the angst of

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, 1929/1996, op. cit., p. 101

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 95

cupiditas. Rather, what this points to is a diminution of the Augustinian struggle: only once I, myself, achieve *caritas* can I truly love the neighbor. In other words, Arendt has made rigid the *cupiditas-caritas* dialectic. Gone is the continual return to the desire of material, of lower-order loves, and feeling the need to overcome this. Rather, for Arendt, we move into the love of *caritas* and recognize and love the similarly situated *caritas* within the neighbor. Indeed, she even directs us away from considering the neighbor as a material Other, for we are to see the things in the neighbor which he does not see in himself: we see not him-in-himself, but rather, a *fantasy* of him.

But the neighbor, and how we interpret the love of neighbor has significant consequences. Recall that it is through this love of neighbor that we might locate the objects of our common love, the very basis of our community. Also, the encounter with the neighbor is, for Augustine, how we mediate the distance between the Earthly City and the Heavenly City: the encounter with the neighbor teaches us both love of God and love of Self, simultaneously. If any one of these three aspects—Self, Neighbor, God—is minimized, the Augustinian system begins to fall apart, for the points of reflexion become indistinct. Primarily, the indistinction comes about because one loses sight of transcendence—that *external* point that we might use to make and stand by our judgments. When these points become muddled, then that ability to make judgments—to know what is belonging to higher-ordered and lower-ordered love; to recognize that which is worthy of our desire—becomes an impossibility. Judgment, that faculty

which all possess and which all must learn how to use in order to build community, loses its grounding.

But this muddying of reference points appears to be precisely what Arendt does with Augustine. Specifically, she overwrites the mediative aspect of the neighbor to the point wherein the Self is obliterated:

In accepting God's love man has denied himself. Now he loves and hates as God does. By renouncing himself man at the same time renounces all worldly relations. He then views himself solely as created by God, rejecting whatever he himself has made and whatever relations he has established...Because man is tied to his own source, he loves his neighbor neither for his neighbor's sake nor for his own sake. *Love of neighbor leaves the lover himself in absolute isolation and the world remains a desert for man's isolated existence.*³¹

But perhaps Arendt is not making such a surprising claim here, given that she has asserted that we love the createdness of the neighbor, rather than the neighbor as a material entity, who also experiences desire, also experiences angst. For what I see here is a necessary correspondence: if we love the abstracted quality of the neighbor, we likewise must love only the abstracted qualities of the Self. But the question here is *why* Arendt would want to situate Augustine in such abstraction. What is lost in Arendt's interpretation is that serious consideration of the human condition provided by Augustine, that consideration that "repudiat[es] of the classical 'politics of perfection.'"³² Augustine *knows* and *recognizes* the foibles of mankind, and yet Arendt here is suggesting that man detach himself, his relationships, from that very materiality that Augustine so urgently addresses.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 94 emphasis mine

³² R. A. Markus, 1970, *op. cit.*, p. 171

And, most peculiarly, given where Arendt will want to take us politically, is that this sums to a diminution of the *individuality* of the Augustinian neighbor. Indeed, she wants to privilege love as a thing-in-itself, disconnected from the Augustinian material experience of the Other:

Death is meaningless to love of neighbor, because in removing my neighbor from the world death only does what love has already accomplished; that is, I love in him the being that lives in him as his source. Death is irrelevant to this love, because every beloved is only an occasion to love God. The same source is loved in each individual human being.³³

This is a very troubling passage. There is, indeed, little to suggest any sort of difference between one being and another in terms of comprehending the other. Each, in terms of being an object of my love, is devoid of any interests, behaviors, beliefs, of *situatedness*. Indeed, the other here is barely mortal; his mortality is merely a vessel for that which is beyond: his mortality is only significant insofar as it is a representation of an abstraction. And indeed, what Arendt suggests here is that I am to love the abstraction of the man, rather than love the man in himself. She takes this train of thought even further when she claims that this love of neighbor “...is never...for his own sake, only for the sake of divine grace.”³⁴

What, then, are we to make of *this* Arendt? This does not seem to the Arendt who so concerned with critiquing modern “worldlessness”.³⁵ The person—the individual—whether as object of love or as the lover has been flattened. Why

³³ Hannah Arendt, 1929/1996, op. cit., pp. 96-7

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 111

³⁵ Dana Villa, Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political, Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press. 1996 p. 11

does she interpret Augustinian love to grant so little specificity to the individual? And here is where I believe we can find something crucial to understanding Arendt's political thought. At root, she is fundamentally estranged from the idea of the *person*, where this person is understood in a materially complex way. That is, the person I refer to is this Augustinian being of the *saeculum*, this wayward soul, full of desires, sometimes righteous, sometimes sinful. The point is, always for Augustine, *humans can never be perfect*; that is for God and God alone. The wretchedness of this life is that while we may desire to be perfect, we never can be.

Arendt, however, in taking love out of the materially grounded angst of Augustine is suggesting a sort of perfection. When she overwrites the specificity of the neighbor, loving rather, his 'essence,' she suggests an escape from Augustinian mortality and fallibility. What I suggest here is that Arendt presents Augustine in this way because she has become concerned with the overwhelming modern recourse to individuality. Obviously, she is turning away from God, but she is also turning away from the modern self-as-subject. Indeed, her interpretation of *caritas* as laying bare only the most abstracted versions of both Self and Other is a retreat from the narcissism of modernity: we subjects are nothing but a promise. The concerns and cares of each one of us, in our own individual specificity, has little meaning for the world as whole. It is a case of the sum being greater than its parts.

Elsewhere, Arendt comments:

The discovery of one's own inner life and the broad and thorough exploration of that life are in no way related to psychology or modern

reflection, despite the innumerable and striking psychological details Augustine reveals. For the inner life in this context is not valuable because it is one's own and therefore interesting, but because it was bad and now has become good. The individual life is not deserving of attention because it is individual and unique in the modern sense, or because it is capable of unique development and full realization of its personal potential. It is of value not because it is unique, but because it is exemplary. As my life has been, so all lives can be...God's grace can enter any and every individual life in this same way.³⁶

And here, we can perhaps gain a certain insight into what will appear later with regard to her arrangement of political life and how she situates the person within. Quite simply, her concern is with the *person* as opposed to the *individual*. We can discern in Arendt's statement above a distinction that is not mere semantics. She sees the individual as this modern being, fully aware of the spectacle of his or her own inner life, and trying to project that outward into the world. This individual is one who must be restrained, who projects onto the world, in Arendt's perspective, only the privacy of *cupiditas*. For Arendt, modern political life needs to break with this self-referential fascination. To move forward, to engage in a 'care for the world,' the unrealized possibility of the person is what must be held sacrosanct. That is, following her interpretation of Augustine, we are to 'love his createdness': we love him in his essence, but not in his specificity. What transforms one from a person to an individual is not, for Arendt, something with which we can come to *political* terms. For her, it is inherently private (following *cupiditas*) and therefore not germane to public discussion. And with this, we get a fuller picture of how Arendt wants us to think about the political, where the case for a political life is

³⁶ Hannah Arendt, "Augustine and Protestantism," (1930) in Jerome Kohn, ed., 1994, p 173, op. cit., p. 26

...the fact that people belong to each other is no longer determined by generation but by imitation. Through imitation, everyone may initiate the impulse of saving one's neighbor. Imitation rests on mutual love. But this is never love in our sense which has become impossible in detachment from the world. Mutual love lacks the element of choice, we cannot choose our "beloved"...This love makes human relations definite and explicit.³⁷

We are, in other words, to look beyond the world, beyond the concrete attachments that we sensually experience. Rather, what Arendt suggests here is that our worldly relationships preface that eternal futurity, the *idea* of the person, the *idea* of the world rather than the individual or our particular situations.

What, then, I take away from her grounding in Augustine is not a grounding in Augustinian existentialism, but rather, what may be considered a reversal of Augustine. And this rests not only on the fact that she cannot bring a concept of 'God' into the modern. That is beside the point. What I see her attempting in the dissertation is undoubtedly to read a modern sensibility into Augustine, but in her interpretation, she cuts off all that Augustine brings as a thinker of the world. Arendt elevates the love of *caritas* to a God-like status, and in so doing, she loses the Augustine of angst. For Augustine it is our moment in the present that mediates the future, and this moment is lost in Arendt's analysis. For Arendt moves us away from the individual's negotiation of the material-eternal dialectic, and we become simply the promise of the future, not the rich complexity of the present. Instead, she brings about an *abstract* person, living in a world that is itself abstracted. But if all is so abstract, how then are we to negotiate the present? Without the opening for something even more incomprehensible than

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, 1929/1996 op. cit., pp. 110-111

we are to ourselves (which, for Augustine, is God), how are we to engage any sort of beginning of judgment?

And this is precisely the problem that I contend flows throughout Arendt's political writings. While she may have a very astute sense of politics as something larger and greater than any one individual or society, her politics is one that loses meaningful content when it comes down to the negotiating of the material present. There will not only be a reluctance on her part to consider how issues of the 'social' become incorporated into political demands, but she will also—and perhaps this is even more important—demand a 'purity' from political life. As we shall see, she very strongly articulates a politics that requires that no one person ever be made 'superfluous,' and this will demand that each be allowed to enter the public sphere. But, as I will articulate in later chapters, this actor is based on a very thin set of assumed concerns; 'interests' will be less concerned with material needs than with an abstract 'care for the world.' But how can one possibly care for a world without caring for these individual interests?

Chapter Two

Rahel Varnhagen: The Strangeness of Me

Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess is a deceptively important work in the Arendtian universe. Rahel Varnhagen seems a rather insufferable twit, and hence one wonders why Arendt even bothered recalling this woman's life. But this is what Arendt wants us to appreciate. In dedicating a book-length work to this woman, who left behind no legacy other than a collection of letters, Arendt demonstrates the modern confusion over what it means to be a subject.

Rahel Varnhagen mistakes Enlightenment progress for destiny, and hence, does not feel any great need to consider solidarity, the universal, or the political world. Rather, she translates Enlightenment values into personal values: she engages in a cultivation of the Self, with little concern for the external world. As a Jew, as a woman, this Self can only be precariously developed. Rahel's¹ understanding of the relationship between her Self and the larger world is tenuous at best, for she continually repeats the error of interpreting the world through a personal lens. That is, she can only consider the world as it affects her, and she cannot seem to grasp that her specific situation is not so unlike others. Rahel Varnhagen thus falls into the trap of the romantic, utterly consumed with the 'spectacle of inner life.' Rahel's insufferable qualities are a

¹ Following Arendt's usage, I shall refer to Rahel Varnhagen by her first name.

result of this continual self-regard and self-assessment, without any sense of her failure being situated in a larger context. Rahel embodies the confusion of the Self unleashed by the Enlightenment, where the “...vision of an abstract humanity of ‘pure human beings,’ divested of all specific attachments...”² competes with the specificity of individuality. Indeed, such abstraction and universalization may be considered, as Heine did, a “dangerous fiction.”³

Rahel Varnhagen is a study in this confusion over the meaning of equality to the individual. Rahel’s life story provides a counterpoint to the universalizing qualities of the Enlightenment: to understand the plight of Rahel Varnhagen is to understand the limits of the Enlightenment. Yes, Rahel was a Jew in a society that only marginally accepted Jews. But, as I read *Rahel Varnhagen*, the purpose is less to illuminate Jewish pariahdom⁴ than it is to disaggregate the ‘myth’ of the singular individual.

However, we must be careful to make certain distinctions here, for the criticism Arendt is making is not that of the abstraction of the idea of Self in and of itself, but rather, of a very particular *type* of Self-abstraction. What Arendt

² Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 1992. p. 217

³ *idem*.

⁴ In this discussion, we should be wary of arguments concerning Arendt’s “identity” with Rahel. The question is less one of Arendt’s own Jewish background than that of how the Jew is seen and constructed by society. To reduce Arendt’s interest in Rahel as one of identity is perhaps even at counterpurpose to Arendt’s intent in writing this biography. For Jewishness here—and elsewhere in the Arendt opus—is the test of Enlightenment universalism. For example: “Thus the auto-biographical element in Arendt’s questioning, as she looked back at Rahel Varnhagen’s life, could be: As a German Jew, where do I come from? What were the conditions in which my great-grandparents were admitted into German history How did they interpret such an historical novelty?” (Martine Leibovici, “Arendt’s Rahel Varnhagen: A New Kind of Narration in the impasses of German- Jewish Assimilation and Existenzphilosophie,” *Social Research* Vol 74: No 3 : Fall 2007 903-922 p. 909) Discourse of this type appears time and again in the Arendtian literature. Granted, Arendt was as Jew and did write significantly on Jewish concerns. But this, I believe, has less to do with issues of identity than with the argument I make in this chapter.

critiques here is what she sees as a dangerous and flawed emphasis on the pursuit of the *personal* over the individual. Arendt's concern is that of to rectify the existential angst of the modern with something so inwardly focused that the world can neither be seen nor interpreted except idiosyncratically. And, as idiosyncratic, one loses the ability to communicate with others; the self can no longer project into the world and care for it, but can only engage in a care for the Self. What I believe Arendt wants us to appreciate here is that there is a conflict in the construction of the existentialist Self, and should one choose the wrong version, then we move further away from creating a world 'fit for human habitation.' Through the telling of Rahel Varnhagen story, Arendt wants us to recognize the myth of the singular individual.

Seyla Benhabib rightly points to *Rahel Varnhagen* as playing an essential role in understanding Arendt's political thought. *Rahel Varnhagen* presents an "alternative genealogy of modernity" in which

...modernity cannot simply be identified with the spread of commodity exchange relations and the growth of a capitalist economy; nor can modernity be reduced to the spread of mass society alone. Modernity also brings with it new forms of social interaction, patterns of association, habits and mores.⁵

Indeed, what comes to light in *Rahel Varnhagen* is the contentious Self raised by modernity, and the necessity to distinguish a *private* Self from a *public* Self.

Having begun this distinction in her dissertation, Arendt now raises this with regard to negotiating the divide in consideration of the political. Specifically,

Arendt alerts us to the dangers of failing to recognize the distinction between

⁵ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. 1996. p. 29

these two Selves, of mistaking the freedom of personal Self-realization with the freedom of political liberty. Indeed, this confusion between the particularity of the personal and the universality of the individual leads to fraudulence in politics. For, asserting an ideal of *personal* freedom can never generate an Enlightened politics: it is merely personal privilege.⁶

Let us be clear here. There is good reason for this confusion.

Enlightenment thinkers "...sought to foster the moral autonomy of the individual over established traditions and the critical use of rationality against... 'mythopoetical thinking.' This enabled them to link progress with the extension of freedom and the exercise of the intellect."⁷ *Rahel Varnhagen* demonstrates that the appropriateness of direction of 'moral autonomy of the individual' must be considered. *Sapere aude* is easily turned inward, toward a cultivation of Self, while neglecting the situatedness of this Self in the World.

But we must consider the purpose of the Enlightenment's insistence upon this abstracted and universalized humanity. For such abstraction is precisely the foundation upon which equality is built. We must be wary of the tendency to

...[relegate] equality to "the dark background of mere givenness," confusing it with likeness or normality, so that the exceptional human being seems defective. Instead of fostering initiative, autonomy, and political action, the concept promotes parvenu striving to fit in and be accepted as normal. The modern, social view thus not only hides human responsibility for enacting an equality that is not naturally guaranteed but also undermines the very capacity for action by teaching conformism.⁸

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*. Liliane Weissberg, ed.; Richard and Clara Winston, trans. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1997. p. 258

⁷ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2004 pp. 19-20

⁸ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 1998. p. 73

Obviously, turning the individual outwards, towards the world, becomes a political act, in that this is an insistence that I am a part of this world, that I need not be bound by superstitions and tradition, that I can project my thoughts into this world. But it is also very easy to take the command *sapere aude* internally, to become entranced by the dazzling light of 'knowing' myself. And, undoubtedly, there is a connection between these two aspects of the Self: the internal and external aspects of the Self are dialectical, the Augustinian struggle between *caritas* and *cupiditas*. Thus our—and Arendt's—frustration with Rahel, for she seems not to recognize the division between these two Selves: she is an exemplar of the foolishness of 'knowing oneself,' where through "...self-knowledge [s]he can absorb the whole world or that the climax of [her] self-knowledge is the realization that the whole world is already inside [her]self."⁹ This is the hubris of the modern: we fail to realize the Self in the World.

The Self as a work of art

In her example of Rahel Varnhagen, Arendt defines that which brings about the hubris of the modern. That the Self dazzles—that is perhaps obvious. What is far more fascinating is what Arendt pinpoints as Rahel's belief in the absolute certainty of progress, that despite Rahel's tenuous status within society she neglected the need for solidarity. So long as she, herself, was in an Enlightened, progressing society, there was little point in joining any struggle for

⁹ George Kateb, Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld. 1983 p. 6

social and political reform.¹⁰ And thus the hubris: we fail to recognize that 'progress' is not something that will come about without our taking responsibility for its cultivation and care. Self-enlightened individuals do not ensure progress unless each takes a stance of active responsibility toward the world. Quite simply, Arendt, through this singular life of Rahel Varnhagen, demonstrates the dangerous fallacy that emerges with the modern: we cannot succumb to the idea that the world will take care of itself and my own responsibility is to care for my Self. A world 'fit for human habitation' will not come about through a critical mass of self-enlightened individuals.

Rahel Varnhagen was caught in the *idea* of Enlightenment, and failed to realize that it is not enough to possess this as an ideal: one must engage the world in its specificity, in public activity. Pursuing Enlightenment against the backdrop of an unstable world is a an exercise in futility. For, as Rahel Varnhagen's experience demonstrates, without some sort of reliable world external to oneself, no matter how much self-enlightenment one pursues individually, that very Self can be smashed to smithereens. Rahel was rejected by that world she so desperately wanted to embrace. In this, Arendt suggests a very intriguing critique of the ways in which Enlightenment reason has been misappropriated. For in Arendt's recounting of Rahel the individual is not a self-actualizing entity. Instead, for Rahel, Reason becomes a *personal* quality, the sort of quality one wants to develop to be accepted as a recognized member of society. *Rahel Varnhagen* is a study in the dangers of internalizing the Self.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*. op. cit. p. 220

And thus Arendt's critique: this sense of becoming self-enlightened is what blinds Rahel, and in this, her fate is not unlike others. For

In contrast to all other groups, the Jews were defined and their position determined by the body politic. Since, however, this body politic had no other social reality, they were, socially speaking, in the void. Their social inequality was quite different from the inequality of the class system; it was again mainly the result of their relationship to the state, so that, in society, the very fact of being born a Jew would either mean that one was overprivileged—under special protection of the government—or underprivileged, lacking certain rights and opportunities which were withheld from the Jews in order to prevent their assimilation.¹¹

In other words, Jews did not see themselves as overdefined, as Othered as a class. No, their failure was a *personal* one, a failure to be remedied not through solidarity but through developing oneself.

It is obviously beyond the scope of this project to rehearse the history of European Jewry here. But what we should recall is that Jewishness possesses a liminal quality in that the favored, protected Jews of the Court were highly differentiated from their religious kin of the *shtetl*. Even so, those 'favored' Jews led a precarious existence, dependent not on a transparent rule of law, but on the personal protection of the ruler. Hence, the 'Jew' takes on an overdefined character: he can be both the assimilated Jew or the atavistic Jew. Those who, like Rahel Varnhagen, belonged to that class of wealthy, protected, assimilated Jews view the Enlightenment as the end of their oppressed status. However, their situation, according to Arendt, led them to view emancipation through a *personal* lens, where "Jews did not even want to be emancipated as a whole; all they wanted was to escape from Jewishness, as individuals of possibility. Their

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, London and San Diego: Harcourt, Inc. 1968. p. 14

urge was secretly and silently to settle what seemed a personal problem, a personal misfortune.”¹² But to do this involves developing a self-hatred, an opposition within oneself, “...to deny, change, reshape by lies this self...since [one] could not very well deny her existence out of hand.”¹³ For, contrary to the notion of equality of Enlightenment universalism, society still demanded that the Jew

...could not pick and choose among the elements to which she would be willing to assimilate, could not decide what she liked and disliked. If one accepted Christianity, one had to accept the time’s hatred of the Jews right along with it...If one wishes to be a normal person precisely like everybody else, there is scarcely any alternative to exchanging old prejudices for new ones. If that is not done, one involuntarily becomes a rebel...and remains a Jew. And if one really assimilates, taking all the consequences of denial of one’s own origin and cutting oneself off from those who have not or have not yet done it, one becomes a scoundrel.¹⁴

And so, Rahel’s tragedy comes to light. But what Arendt wants us to see is that her tragedy is less the fact of her Jewishness but rather her insistence on her individuality. Rahel Varnhagen, in refusing to see herself in solidarity with others in that oppressed class ‘Jew,’ falls into the hubris of distinction, of not wanting to be like one of those that she, herself, disdained.

For Arendt, Rahel’s affliction is that she tries to distinguish herself in a society that still sees her as one of ‘them.’ Try as she might, her individual Self is suffocated by the fact of her being born a Jew. And to the surrounding society, it makes little difference whether she is assimilated or *shetl*: she remains an Other. Her life becomes a contradiction, for she “...stubbornly insisted upon her rights,

¹² Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, op. cit. p. 88

¹³ *ibid.* p. 92

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 256

upon human rights, had resolutely refused to share the general fate of the Jews, to place her hopes in political measures which would benefit all. And the more she did these things, the more typically Jewish her fate turned out to be...”¹⁵ And indeed, this is her tragic error: no matter how distinguished a *salonnière* she might be, her individual—supposedly subject to the standard of universal equality—is always clouded by the fact of her Jewishness.

It is all too understandable that Rahel would turn Romantically inward, for by cultivating her personal Self, she might learn how to “...learn how to present and represent [her] individuality...[for those outside of high society] everything depended upon ‘personality’ and the ability to express it. To know how to play the role of what one actually was, seemed the most important thing.”¹⁶

Arendt thus points to the irony of Rahel’s pursuit: she so desperately wanted to appear as an *individual* with the dignity of reason before an audience for whom such considerations meant nothing. Her faith in History would allow her to one day be seen as such an individual; her role until then was one of preparation, of making herself into a person distinct from her origins. And so she will look upon herself as a ‘work of art,’ as a cultivation of her ‘soul’: she would be exceptional. She followed the path of Rousseau, where ... “[t]he potential outcast could become a hero, a subject whose importance is derived from his or her mere difference from all other beings in the world...In a mode of constant

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 255

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, London and San Diego: Harcourt, Inc. 1968. pp. 59-60

repetition, she persuaded herself of her individuality, the integrity of her self...”¹⁷

And, as exceptional, as an exemplar, she could become a full member of society.

She would be a member of that ‘critical mass’ of the Enlightenment.

However, in making this romantic turn, Rahel was unprepared for the consequences of her actions. For in turning inward, to make her *individuality* rather than her *persona* the actor at stake, Rahel would find that society cared for her soul no more than it did for the fact of her life.¹⁸ Rahel would thus be doubly-rejected, both as a Jew and as an individual, for in cultivating this exemplar of personal dignity, she lost her particularity, her individuality. In converting *sapere aude* into a *personal* quest, into a romantic attempt at ‘self-awareness’ the Self loses its universalizing and generalizing critical qualities. In claiming the Self as a work of art as a means into society, Rahel had acquired to the point of mastery “...the art of representing her own life: the point was not to tell the truth, but to display herself; not always to say the same thing to everyone, but to each what was appropriate for him.”¹⁹ Indeed, she appears to lose any ability to have a subjectivity of her own, and with that, any ability to make decisions and choices of her own.²⁰ Arendt’s Rahel attempts to find a transcendental in *sapere aude*, and to do so, she “...needed only to annihilate herself and her origin, her ‘sensuous’ existence.”²¹ And the loss would not be so great, for

...she would only be affirming life, which in any case had never shown the slightest consideration for her concrete, sensuous specificity. It would be

¹⁷ Liliane Weissberg, “Introduction: Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, and the Writing of (Auto)biography,” in Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, op. cit.. p. 11

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, op. cit. p. 153

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 173

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 81

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 183

pure gain for her to receive gratis a history whose past could be grasped *a priori*, whose future could be shaped by pure thought.²²

Arendt's reading of Rahel's life is thus one of Rahel having sacrificed a unique and specific life to the (misperceived) demands of History. Rahel exhibited "...the misconception of self which was inevitable so long as she wished to understand and express within the categories of her time her sense of life: the resolve to consider life and the history it imposes upon the individual as more important and more serious than her own person."²³ And in this, I think we can see more than a glimmer of development of Arendt's abstracted and perfected neighbor.

Negotiating the Self

Although Rahel Varnhagen may seem to us a fool, there is something remarkably sympathetic in Arendt's portrait. For Rahel's life encapsulates a fundamental problem lurking at the center of modern life, that of how one may negotiate the Self. And it is our own problematic relationships with our own Selves, our own sense of trying to find a place in the world that gives Rahel's story relevance today. For in the condition of modernity, where, at least abstractly, all roles are fungible, where one must become an individual to thrive, *choosing* the individual one wants to be is a task of anguish:

For the possibilities of being different from what one is are infinite. Once one has negated oneself, however, there are no longer any particular

²² *idem.*

²³ *ibid.*, pp. 81-2

choices. There is only one aim: always, at any given moment, to be different from what one is; never to assert oneself, but with infinite pliancy to become anything else, so long as it is not oneself. It requires an inhuman alertness not to betray oneself, to conceal everything and yet have no definite secret to cling to.²⁴

This suggests that becoming a Self is fraught with an existential tension between the *what I must appear as* and the *what I long to be*: one moment of the equation is always betraying the other moment. However, there is more here than this tension within the Self. For in this fundamental moment of tension, in which one attempts to assert some sort of meaning and presence into one's own life, any particular sense of self-security is also fundamentally undermined. As Arendt notes,

Nothing could be more instructive and more comforting to Rahel than a life in which every event had a meaning, in which only comprehensible happenings took place, so that there remained scarcely any loophole through which the purely destructive elements, which compel a person to give up, can penetrate...²⁵

Arendt wants us to recognize that while the Self, in its immediacy, tantalizes, but self-fascination removes one from Selfness. That is, it becomes ever so easy to mistake the internal life of the Self, in all its robustness and creativity and promise, with Enlightened progress. But as Rahel Varnhagen comes to understand, there is little purpose in this Self-development if there is no community into which one can project one's voice. Rahel mistakenly interpreted the achievement of reason as something personal, as something to be accomplished within herself. For what we see in Arendt's interpretation of Rahel's life is a concern with the way the Self may become divided, where the

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 93

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 169

personalization of the individual becomes a misappropriation of Reason. For Rahel *did* long for Reason, and to live in a society framed by Reason. Retreat into the Romantic, into the private, is misanthropy. However, the position required of Reason is one of reciprocity, wherein the World is but artifice, a creation of our own making. Or, to put it differently, the World is a product of a plurality of Selves projecting their Selfhood outward.

And thus Arendt's point: each and every one of us bears responsibility to ensure that the progress promised by the Enlightenment is constantly assured. The world in which we live is the very thing that enables us to enjoy our Selfhood; but likewise, our projected Selfhood is what ensures the continuity of the World. There is a very simple reciprocity between the world's existence and the existence of each and every person in the world. But this reciprocity is what Rahel fails to understand: she "...becom[es] ultimately incapable of grasping generalities, recognizing relationships, or taking an interest in anything but [her] own person."²⁶

Rahel's tragedy is that her interior life becomes a universe unto itself: she has no ability to view the world through the lens of objective reason. Instead, the world is filtered through the narcissism of subjectivity, where

Events struck home only when she became aware that they were destroying her small personal world, the one world in which she had managed, in spite of everything, to live. The salon in which private things were given objectivity by being communicated, and in which public matters counted only insofar as they had private significance—this salon ceased to exist when the public world, the power of general misfortune, became so overwhelming that it could no longer be translated into private terms. Once more everything personal was being decided by the things that

²⁶ *ibid.*, . p. 248

effected everyone; all that really remained to be communicated was pure gossip.²⁷

What Rahel failed to realize was that personal freedom would always be limited by political freedom, that she could not win her own freedom through privilege, but only through joining with others to change the external context in which such personal freedom might be enjoyed.²⁸ In her pursuit of reason, of Enlightenment through creating herself as a work of art, Rahel had neglected the most critical thing: that liberty must be communicable.²⁹ But if one proceeds to liberty through its personalization, rather than its generalities, any such commentary is based in idiosyncratic ‘experience’ and thus incommunicable. Such privileging of the idiosyncratic is the antithesis, not the fulfillment of, the Enlightenment project.³⁰

Rahel Varnhagen lives on an abstracted plane of existence, and doing so only reduces her life. What Rahel realizes—or what Arendt wants us to see—is that “[I]f she [Rahel] wanted to live, she had to learn to make her presence felt, to display herself; she had to unlearn her previous acceptance of the bareness and the sketchiness of her external existence as something final; she had to renounce originality and become one person among others.”³¹ This strangeness of the Self is, for Arendt, a conceit that must be overcome. But what gives her

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 176-77

²⁸ “Freedom and equality were not going to be conjured into existence by individuals’ capturing them by fraud as privileges for themselves.” Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, *op. cit.*, p. 258

²⁹ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*, *op. cit.* p. 30

³⁰ “In political terms, therefore, the problem is less the lack of intensity in the lived life of the individual than the increasing attempts by individuals and groups to insist that their own, particular, deeply felt existential or religious or aesthetic experience should be privileged in the public realm.” *Ibid.*, p. 129

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 174

argument force is not simply an argument to the moral 'goodness' of acting together, but rather, that solidarity with others reinforces the existence of the Self. It is the position that "[i]n my single self I am not complete; on the contrary, I live as one among the numbers of men with whom I share the world. Therefore I am not the master of my experience and certainly not of events in the world."³²

Overcoming the strangeness of me allows one to see that "...the enjoyment of civil rights as a private person, however rare and valuable it may be, is not the same thing as being a citizen of a republic and enjoying political freedom."³³

Privacy—the retreat into the Self—is the 'dangerous fiction' we must learn to conquer.

Misanthropy and philanthropy

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Arendt's critique is that of external reality threatening my Self: when threatened, the temptation is to retreat even further into the isolation of the Self. For in the inner world of the Self there is "...a semblance of unlimited power by the very act of isolation from the world...[and] thinking becomes limitless because it is no longer molested by anything exterior..."³⁴ And thus the irony Arendt wants to expose: just as we are freed by Reason from an enchanted world, we stage a retreat into the Self. And when we

³² Melvyn A. Hill, "The Fictions of Mankind and the Stories of Men," in Melvyn A. Hill, ed. Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World, New York: St. Martin's Press. 1979. pp. 288-9

³³ Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 233

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, op. cit., pp. 90-91

stage this retreat, we give up on our ability to engage with it, to care for it, and see it progress as promised by the Enlightenment.

The world is inherently filled with ambiguity, and this significantly fuels one's angst. Moreover, each moment of ambiguity is a potential destabilizer of this sense of Self I have built. Of course no one is capable of understanding the totality of the world, let alone predicting the future. Man, rather than overcoming the limitations of an enchanted world, mired in tradition and superstition, loses his connection to it: ambiguity chases one into the security of an inner world. But as one cultivates that inner world, one also raises the stakes of rejection by the exterior world. For now the emphasis lies not in finding commonalities with others, but rather in the compulsion to 'bare one's soul':

The impulse to project one's compassion as one's best and truest self onto the political world is indissolubly connected to a terrific self-absorption, a perhaps narcissistic interest in one's inner condition. The most consuming interest of the compassionate soul is that there be enough suffering in the world to keep itself torn and hence continuously fascinating as an internal spectacle.³⁵

In other words, the narcissist, in attempting to shore up the Self as means of staving off angst, converts the world into something that serves a personal gratification. And, when society rejects him on the basis of his narcissism, he becomes a misanthrope. For, for the narcissist, viewing the world as he does through a *personal* lens, it can never be he who does not fit, but rather, the world that denied his rightful place in the world:

Meanwhile, betrayed and wronged in everything,
I'll flee this bitter world where vice is king,

³⁵ George Kateb, Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil, Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld. 1983. p. 94

And seek some spot unpeopled and apart
Where I'll be free to have an honest heart.³⁶

The narcissist is the misanthrope, attempting to purge the world of all that causes angst.

The path the misanthrope chooses is arguably the psychologically easier of these two paths, for the misanthrope need never be confronted with anything other than his own opinion. The ambiguity of the world is pacified

...because there is no longer any demand for action...Man's autonomy becomes hegemony over all possibilities; reality merely impinges and rebounds. Reality can offer nothing new; introspection has already anticipated everything....³⁷

This is not the strategic retreat from the public that helps one reflect and refine one's opinions *à la* Aristotle. It is, instead, the outright denial of existing in a world with others, the refusal of contact with others, the refusal to accept responsibility toward others. To allow any of those options would demand a reaction, a reaction that denies total ownership over the Self. Ultimately, the one who retreats from the world into isolation, is one for whom "[t]he importance of emotions exist[s] independently of possible consequences, independently of actions or motives."³⁸

The misanthrope is the provincial, the homesteader, the bourgeois philistine who wishes to escape the 'messiness' of living in a world held in common. The misanthrope cuts himself off from the world, never allowing his views to be challenged by another. His world is devoid of any sort of

³⁶ Molière, *The Misanthrope*, Richard Wilbur, trans. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. 1954/1666, Act Five, Scene Eight, p. 152

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 98

psychological ambiguity because he allows no views other than his own into his world. And, of course, since no challenges are raised, he feels assured in his rightness. Assured in his rightness, he never feels any 'slippage' in his basic sense of identity, nor does he feel any need to 'act in concert' for he sees no reason to act: "...the misanthrope finds no one with whom he cares to share the world, that he regards nobody as worthy of rejoicing with him in the world and nature and the cosmos."³⁹ He tends his garden, oblivious to the world around him.

Modernity pushes us toward misanthropy. To be a misanthrope is to refuse to act, to turn inward and refuse to take part in the care of the world. Misanthropy destroys the artifice that holds the world together—neither recklessly nor violently, but through a refusal to participate in its maintenance. And, denying any voice but his own, men descend into a futile existence. In this, a parallel is drawn with the question of the 'social' Arendt raises in *On Revolution*, where

...introspection...does what Arendt will later charge against the social: it blurs the line between private and public. And romantic withdrawal inward, although an alternative to parvenu striving, is equally "social" in the self-centered isolation, the lack of realism, and the irresponsibility with respect to world consequences it entails.⁴⁰

Misanthropy denies the variety within mankind because the misanthrope refuses to hear any voice but his own, leading to public silence. Or, to pick up another theme that emerges in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, misanthropy leads to banality.

³⁹ Hannah Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing" in *Men in Dark Times*. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1968. p. 25

⁴⁰ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, op. cit., p. 27

Alternatively, the pursuit of philanthropy offsets the modern impulse toward banality and superfluity, for the philanthropist engages the Other and the world about him, projecting himself forward into the space of the community. It is the stance which Arendt attributes to Lessing, where "...humaneness should be sober and cool rather than sentimental; that humanity is exemplified not in fraternity but in friendship; that friendship is not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world..."⁴¹

Philanthropy here is to be taken in its quite literal sense of love of mankind. But there is more here than a moral argument, for if we think of this moment of 'friendship,' it implies far more than merely acting decently. Friendship, as opposed to fraternity, requires effort by the person. For fraternity, at least as Arendt is trying to distinguish it, is something akin to feeling, and hence, organic or natural. Friendship is what emerges when we actively seek out those who share 'objects of common love,' rather than of assuming the sublime and unvoiced connections of fraternity. Friendship—philanthropy—thus can never be satisfied in privacy, for this is "[a] philosophy of mankind [that] is distinguished from a philosophy of man by its insistence on the fact that not Man, talking to himself in the dialogue of solitude, but men talking and communicating with each other, inhabit the earth."⁴²

But this position suggests something very intriguing when translated to the political realm, for what Arendt articulates here is a position that demands the

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times," op. cit., p 25

⁴² Hannah Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?," in *Men In Dark Times*. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace. 1995 p 90

sensation of angst. As opposed to the misanthrope, who finds a psychological security in his privacy, the philanthropist, in exposing himself to the world, must necessarily be fraught with the sensation of self-doubt. It is the danger of loss of an integrated sense of Self that Rahel runs up against: “..the adventure of particularity without having been taken in by any particular society, the sole stake she could offer for any action was her own self. When fate did not accept her sacrifice...she was thrown back into the despair and hopelessness out of which she had come.”⁴³

And so, developing the posture of the philanthropist is one that necessarily exposes one to existential danger, for the philanthropist must be willing to expose the Self and acknowledge whatever that may be returned to him. Entering the public sphere subjects us to scrutiny, to public reason and wisdom:

Because she herself had acted no differently from other people, she was forced into solidarity with the rest of the human race, who also do little else but err. Her very regrets enabled her to feel that she may have erred all her life, and like everyone else she could no longer be sure about past or future.⁴⁴

However, the very act of exposing oneself in this way, though it may seem threatening, even damaging to the Self, is, for Arendt instead a highly productive undertaking, counterintuitive as it may initially appear. Rather, what Arendt sees is that in throwing oneself into the public, in daring to engage the Other, one is actually affirming the Self. It is only through communication—a dialogue with Others—that we can come to recognize what the Self *is*:

⁴³ Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, op. cit., p. 120

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 164

The principle itself is communication: truth, which can never be grasped as dogmatic content, emerges as “existential” substance clarified and articulated by reason, communicating itself and appealing to the reasonable existing of the other, comprehensible and capable of comprehending everything else. “*Existenz* only becomes clear through reason; reason only has content through *Existenz*.”...The point is that here for the first time communication is not conceived as “expressing” thoughts and therefore being secondary to thought itself. Truth itself is communicative, it disappears and cannot be conceived outside communication; within the “existential” realm, truth and communication are the same. “Truth is what binds us together.” Only in communication—between contemporaries as well as between the living and the dead—does truth reveal itself.⁴⁵

All the strange things we might believe in private become exposed as fallacy when illuminated in the company of others. Or, alternatively, one finds validation and expansion of one’s private ideas when engaged with like-minded others. For Arendt, it is only in the realm of publicity that we can develop a true appreciation of Self—what one believes, what one values, what one wishes to dismiss. For it is only when we interact with others that we must stand up for ourselves and defend (or retract) our beliefs and ideas. Moreover, it is only when we engage in this public interaction that we might expand the realm of our own considerations. Most importantly, bringing oneself into the public realm is, for Arendt, what generates thinking—and hence, the refusal of banality. Via communication with Others, we realize that “...the height of hubris [is] to ignore an external world which was threatening to snatch away or destroy the life one lived only once.”⁴⁶ Acting as a philanthropist, of engaging the world around us, rather than hiding away in the fortress of privacy, is what affirms the life of the Self.

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?,” op. cit., p 85

⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, op. cit., p 174

And so, the misanthrope, even though he is the one who vocalizes his resentment toward the world, engages in a protective activity, reneging on his Self: he will only ever see a limited view of both the world and the Self. The philanthropist, alternatively, must renounce this resentment, but live an angst-ridden life, for he "...renounce[s] originality and become[s] one person among others."⁴⁷ He must accept the equality of being merely human. But in renouncing one's 'originality,' in daring to enter into the world, one must also accept that the world is a messy, chaotic place, and, paradoxically, "[t]he idealism of the humanist tradition of enlightenment and its concept of mankind look like reckless optimism in the light of present realities,"⁴⁸ where "[t]he solidarity of mankind may well turn out to be an unbearable burden..."⁴⁹

Nonetheless—and here is where Arendt makes a profound contribution to political thought—we must recognize that turning away into privacy is a denial not just of the Self, but of the World. These two aspects of life cannot be distinguished from one another, but instead, necessarily reinforce the each other: rejecting the world in the pique of resentment is also to reject the Self.

What makes this insight so extraordinary is that in this Arendt pinpoints precisely that which generates the 'crisis' of the modern. And in this, contra Benhabib, Arendt is no 'reluctant' modern, but absolutely modern. For what Arendt is attempting to resolve here is precisely how one might negotiate this very powerful sense of the Self within the world of equally powerful Selves. But

⁴⁷ idem.

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?", op. cit., p 84

⁴⁹ idem.

Arendt refuses to prioritize one to the other: Self and World must hold equivalency. And from this comes Arendt's demand that we recognize the world as something that, like the Self, can be created. The extension of this, a theme that Arendt will continue with, and even more profound, is that if the idea of the Self is to be assured, we must take an active role in taking care of the world.

Now, we can refine Arendt's confrontation with modernity. For her, our problem is that we have committed ourselves to trying to find and complete 'essence' rather than commit to the fact of the artifice of the world. The search for 'essence'—the natural or organic being each longs to express—is a chimera, a phantom that can never be pinned down in any meaningful way. It is Rahel filtering the world through the veil of emotion, seeing the world only in personal terms: we fail to see commonalities, instead demanding that the world see *me* in my fullness. Rahel is consumed with being accepted; but for her, acceptance rests on being viewed as 'true' by others. But this quest to view one's Self as 'authentic' being is quixotic. We can neither impose on another how we wish to be seen, nor can we be assured that one's own motives are 'pure.' As moderns, we perhaps place far too much importance—grandeur, even—on this demand to be accepted for who and what we are in the public eye.

More important than the inherent narcissism of such a posture is that when we attempt to personalize the world, we also dehumanize the world, for we lose the power of communication:

For the world is not humane just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become humane just because the human voice sounds in it, but only when it has become the object of discourse. However much we are affected by the things of the world, however deeply they may stir and

stimulate us, they become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows.⁵⁰

However, what we must note here is that Arendt is most emphatically not dismissing the individual. Rather, what Arendt wants us to realize is that the person we develop in privacy can never be a complete self; that it is through the publicity of politics—of entering the discussion of care for the world that “...introduces coherence into the self and its experience.”⁵¹ It is no longer simply that differences in opinion and subsequent discussion lead to a ‘robust’ politics: we *require* this difference of opinion in a *psychological* way. It is the variety of opinion that not only keeps politics afloat, but it is what allows us to come to an understanding of Self.

This is, I believe, what makes Arendt’s stance with regard to publicity so radical. She diverges here from the logic of the democratic impulse that suggests that we are, when we come to the public forum, presenting some deeply felt idea of the Self. Instead, she insists that this deeply felt self remain tucked away in the private social sphere: the ‘authentic’ self is only for intimate display. We might make choices in our personal lives that garner social approbation and are excluded because of these choices; there is no compulsion to accept a ‘weirdo’. The onus is on the ‘weirdo’ to accept being ‘weird’ and live with the lack of social connection, not on society to penitentially accept the ‘weirdo’. The domain of privacy thus maintains a distinct and important place in Arendt’s politics that must remain solidly circumscribed by the actors themselves.

⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times,” op. cit., pp 24-25

⁵¹ George Kateb, Hannah Arendt, op. cit. p. 8

Individuals cannot expect society as a whole to capitulate to their individual demands, and they must be ‘...willing to bear the burden of discrimination. This is and must remain their private business.’⁵² But Arendt is very clear on the limits here, for as she also notes “[s]ocial standards are not legal standards and if legislature follows social prejudice, society has become tyrannical.”⁵³

Arendt’s public sphere instead demands that we learn a ‘duality of personhood.’ The public sphere is one that is intimately tied to the development of Self, but which is also unconcerned with the authentic. It is about learning how to construct and become comfortable with a public self who is unconcerned with expressing an intimate understanding of him/her Self: it is that of adopting the persona of the citizen.

But here, I think, is where her model takes a turn away from the political and instead presents a *psychological* resistance to modernity. She asks us not to use some sort of principled measure to develop our critiques, our resistance, but rather, encourages the person, within himself to become a manifestation of virtuous political action.

⁵² Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken Books. 1983. pp. 207-8

⁵³ *idem*.

Chapter Three

The Origins of Totalitarianism: A Surfeit of Superfluosity

The Origins of Totalitarianism lays out the varieties of ways men become superfluous in the modern world, with the culmination of the generation of superfluosity being the totalitarian impulse. By tracing out these lineages of superfluosity, Arendt implicates that the course of modern politics—that is, politics since the French Revolution—leads directly into the totalitarian maw. Indeed, her analysis suggests that totalitarianism, as a form of government, as a psychological condition, is the current against which all further political discussion begins. What is original in her analysis is that totalitarianism is the culmination of men made superfluous: totalitarianism is the politics of men who have lost their connection to the world. And with this, Arendt warns that the symbiotic nature between men and the world is in danger of being permanently ruptured. When men become superfluous, it is not just individual men who are in danger: the world itself becomes ‘unfit for human habitation,’ and all men shall thereby be made superfluous. Reading *Totalitarianism* as Arendt intending to outline the determinants that put totalitarianism into power is an error. Rather, what she has achieved is a pointed analysis of the psychological conditioning or ‘mood’ that permits totalitarianism to emerge as a political *possibility*. That is, Arendt portrays a genealogy that does not attempt to address the mechanics of the

totalitarian acquisition of power, but rather, the grounds and conditions that lead to the totalitarian impulse: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* addresses totalitarianism as an idea.

If there is any one single theme that emerges from those commenting upon political life after Auschwitz, it is this theme of how we might contend with a bleakly hopeless political life. Arendt, like others, sees this moment as a break in the Tradition, where “[t]he 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,’”¹ where totalitarianism represents “...the dissolution of every stable, artificial political structure that had ‘humanized’ life in the West for two centuries.”²

Before we can discuss her remedy—the public sphere—we must first examine *Totalitarianism* as the framework from which her political analyses will derive. That is, we must focus our immediate attention on this problem of the varieties of superfluosity she identifies as distinctly modern phenomena. More specifically, I wish to focus on her interpretation of the existential resentment engendered by superfluosity and political life. Here, ideology becomes significant to our discussion, for, as we shall see, Arendt directly connects existential resentment to ideological thinking. For her, ideologies fuel the distinction of who can claim political rights. It is ideology that determines who

¹ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p. 68

² Dana Villa, *Public Freedom*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2008, p. 251

belongs to a political community: men as thinking individuals are withdrawn from the picture.

The crux of the reclamation of political life is thus to divorce ourselves from ideological thought. For her, all ideology becomes totalitarian. But we must pay careful attention to her formulation of 'ideology' and how it plays a role in both generating and receiving the superfluous of the world. What I shall contend here is that her reading of 'ideology' is problematic for the simple reason that she conflates ideology with a naive understanding of political goals. For what we must recall is that Arendt is attempting to find a way to establish political communities, communities in which we can shake off the sense of existential resentment of the modern condition and feel 'at home in the world.' But by dismissing ideology out of hand, she goes too far, cutting us off from our ability to contest and establish community, for what Arendt fails to see is the politically generative, stabilizing effects ideology can have on political community. Undoubtedly, we can fully understand Arendt's hostility toward ideological thinking; but we must, I believe, seriously consider the adverse effects of a politics *without* ideology.

Is politics possible after Auschwitz?

Arendt's *Totalitarianism* ends on a bleak note—the note that totalitarianism will stay with us. All she offers as remedy is the idea of 'beginning':

...there remains the fact that the crisis of our time and its central experience have brought forth an entirely new form of government which

as a potentiality and an ever-present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on...But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only “message” which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom.³

Obviously, politics has continued to exist, and will continue to exist; but the ‘new’ totalitarianism presents a stark backdrop. The backdrop is, of course, that politics—like poetry—is impossible after Auschwitz. For in *Totalitarianism*, Arendt attempts to demonstrate that the camps are a culmination of socio-political phenomena that strip human life of its creative vitality. Modernity, from Arendt’s perspective, glorifies the “...Archimedean vantage point..,” which “...makes abstraction a requisite of impartiality and thereby makes possible the exercise of power absent ‘any attention to human interests.’”⁴ Political life is thus dangling on the precipice, where the only apparent options are to either 1) retreat from the world into private life; or 2) engage in the politics of superfluous men—the politics of totalitarianism. But, Arendt sees a third option: the reasonable individual, engaged in a care of the world. The question for Arendt is then one of how such a reasonable individual might be reclaimed in the aftermath of totalitarianism, for it is precisely this reasonable individual, “...the single most important pillar of Western humanism..,” that has been destroyed.⁵

Arendt is not so much different from her contemporaries, trying to come to terms with what was undoubtedly the greatest crisis of the twentieth century, one

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, London and San Diego: Harcourt, Inc. 1968, pp. 478-9

⁴ Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, Ithaca and Cornell: Cornell University Press. 1994 p. 29

⁵ *ibid*, p. 207

with which we still have not yet fully come to terms. The camps are beyond human understanding, yet obviously are within human reason, for we built them. Something has gone terribly wrong with civilization given the mere existence of such places. Indeed, how to respond to the camps is perhaps the defining moment of twentieth century political life.

Arendt thus takes us beyond totalitarianism as a phenomena of the aggrandizement of state power, as the encroachment of the state in every nook and cranny of an individual's life, but rather, totalitarianism becomes "the dissolution of every stable, artificial political structure that had 'humanized' life in the West for two centuries"⁶ In particular, it seems that it is the thinking individual of conscience, the *reasonable individual*, that has been lost:

The mass loneliness that Arendt determined as the experience upon which totalitarian domination took root thus signifies the loss of a common world of experience, of the shared meaning that constitutes our human reality. As such, mass loneliness also signifies the disappearance of the ground of thought. In its full structure, the disappearance of that ground consists in the dissolution of shared experience, the emergence of an unprecedented form of organization and behavior and totalitarianism, and the definitive rupture, as a consequence, of traditional categories of thought and contemporary realities of experience.⁷

Thus the beginnings of Arendt's political trajectory are set. How do we recover not just from the catastrophe of totalitarianism itself, but recognize and realize the tragedy that is left in its aftermath?

Although Arendt ends *Totalitarianism* on a bleak note, she does offer this modicum of hope—the new beginning. And this is more than many of her

⁶ Dana Villa, 2008, op. cit., p. 251

⁷ Stan Spyros Draenos, "Thinking Without a Ground: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Situation of Understanding," in Melvyn A. Hill, ed. Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1979, p. 212

contemporaries. There is a sense that Arendt wants to draw our attention to is the post-totalitarian moment as a moment of 'new beginning.' It is up to us to rebuild a world fit for human habitation, a world in which the dangers of superfluosity can be avoided. This will, as we shall see, depend on our ability to generate some way of 'rooting' ourselves into community, for "[i]t was this rootlessness, this lack of place in the world, that in her view made totalitarianism possible."⁸ This will then become Arendt's third option in response to modern alienation: neither privacy nor totalitarianism, but the conscious building of communities composed of 'reasonable individuals.'

But it seems that this may be an impossible task, for as Arendt herself determines,

In comparison with the insane end-result—concentration-camp society—the process by which men are prepared for this end, and the methods by which individuals are adapted to these conditions, are transparent and logical. The insane mass manufacture of corpses is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses. The impetus and what is more important, the silent consent to such unprecedented conditions are the products of those events which in a period of political disintegration suddenly and unexpectedly made hundreds of thousands of human beings homeless, stateless, outlawed and unwanted, while millions of human beings were made economically superfluous and socially burdensome by unemployment. This in turn could only happen because the Rights of Man, which had never been philosophically established but merely formulated, which had never been politically secured but merely proclaimed, have, in their traditional form, lost all validity.⁹

Thus, for Arendt, what we need to pick ourselves up from is not just the horror of the camps, nor the general dissolution of the years that precede the

⁸ Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. p. 10

⁹ Hannah Arendt, 1968, *op. cit.*, p. 447

totalitarian experiment. No, totalitarianism—the politics of the superfluous—traces itself back to the foundational moment of the European liberal tradition: the French Revolution. While her specific reasons for tracing the post-war condition in this way shall be examined in more detail in the chapter devoted to *On Revolution*, I do want to consider here some of the implications of her reasoning on this as it concerns her stance toward ideology and its place in her political apparatus. The moment of newness that she tries to carve out from the wasteland of totalitarianism is one where the ‘reasonable individual’ is, by definition, the one who rejects ideological thinking. Perhaps this is fair enough. But what is more difficult to come to terms with is whether this ‘reasonable individual’ can be created out of whole cloth, whether we can indeed make the leap over the Rights of Man and all it entails: the ‘reasonable individual’ takes too much for granted. For, in wanting to do away with superfluity, Arendt is also doing away with precisely those things which allowed people to recognize themselves as individuals. Arendt will, as we shall see, proclaim that it is the attachment of equality to politics that betrays the French Revolution; that this is what introduces the trajectory toward superfluity. But what Arendt seems not to recognize is that embedded within the Rights of Man is a recognition of *conscience*, and it is this recognition of the equality of conscience that allows people to take a political stand. Indeed, if we want to argue superfluity, it would seem that prior to the French Revolution, the masses were not *relatively* superfluous, but were *absolutely* superfluous. In other words, the rise of liberal political rights entails that men are entitled to an expressive conscience. It is only

when applied to *all men as individuals*, and not just to certain privileged castes, that men can even begin to appreciate and be aware of constructing a world in which to live. Moreover, it would seem that only in a world which premises itself on the idea that men *need not* be superfluous, that the angst of the socially dispossessed can become a concern that needs to be addressed. The republicanism of the French Revolution is not as unidirectional as Arendt portrays.

But this does not necessarily disagree with Arendt's basic thesis—that totalitarianism is generated by this sense of superfluosity. What I believe we will have to pay special attention to is what Arendt's thesis has to say about conscience and its relation to engagement with political activity. The next chapter, dealing with *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, will take this issue of the crisis of conscience in modernity up in more detail. For present purposes I want to ask how this confluence of superfluosity and totalitarianism affects Arendt's attitudes toward politically engaging one's conscience. The outcome of *Totalitarianism* is one in which we must seriously consider whether this ground of conscience can be retrieved.

But behind all of this, of course, are her concerns as raised in *Love and Saint Augustine* and in *Rahel Varnhagen*: the reasonable individual she tries to recover will always be marked by an abstractness, an abstractness that becomes compounded by her unwillingness to accept ideology as a moment of conscience. Ideology will be, for her, the antithesis of one's ability to exercise the spontaneity of individuality, where this spontaneity must retain an independence,

based in "...man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events."¹⁰ First, however, we must engage this issue of modern superfluosness, for so long as men may be made superfluous, not only must we be concerned for the re-emergence of totalitarianism, but any attempts to secure the individuality of men will be made moot.

The varieties of superfluosness in modern society

This issue of superfluosness raised by Arendt seems markedly different from the commentary on alienation so common in critiques of modernity.

Superfluosness for Arendt is akin neither to the *boredom* of modern life so eloquently described by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, nor is it the angst-ridden resentment of Nietzsche. These may, I want to suggest, be *outcomes* of what Arendt describes as superfluosness. Superfluosness is something more concrete in that it attempts to describe not just what it is to be in a state of alienation, but *how* this alienation came to be. But when viewed through this lens of the phenomenology of superfluosness, her interpretation of totalitarianism becomes crystal clear: totalitarianism is a politics that specifically aims to make all men superfluous to politics and the world. The claim Arendt makes is one of intent: other political typologies may produce superfluous men as by-products. Totalitarianism rather, is "...a system in which men are superfluous...As long as

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 455

all men have not been made equally superfluous...the ideal of totalitarian domination has not been achieved.”¹¹ Totalitarianism is *not* a politics of revenge, of the superfluous aiming to take revenge, in an attempt to reclaim a place in the world. Totalitarianism instead is a radical break with political Tradition, where the “...aim at is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself.”¹²

In other words, Arendt’s thesis rests on the idea that totalitarianism has no relationship to the world as it is: it does not follow the political Tradition that, at least since the Greeks, aimed at responding to and addressing the crises of society, nor does it aim at generating some form of ‘best society.’ Instead, for Arendt, it is the denial that humanity has any claims to the world, where men have lost all interest in caring for their own well-being.¹³ The manner of totalitarian expression will thus become for Arendt the expression of an ‘anti-politics’: how she will shape, and attempt to reclaim, a politics will be a refutation not just of the totalitarian apparatus, but of the existential expression of totalitarianism. For Arendt, it will not be enough to merely contest totalitarian modes of governance, but to stake out claims against the qualities that she sees as sustaining this ‘anti-political’ mindset. This will bring her back to the topic of ideology, for in the outcome of tracing this lineage of totalitarianism through superfluousness, it is ideological fervor—the fervor of History—that fuels the totalitarian mindset.

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 456-7

¹² *ibid.*, p. 458

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 315

We can now see the beginning of a problem that will plague her works: by seeing totalitarianism as a 'politics' that stands outside of the Tradition, that aims at the generation of complete superfluosity of the world, we lose a way back to address the very concerns which she raises. For when Arendt constrains herself to the consideration of Tradition, where Tradition becomes that Archimedean vantage point, she sees only a monolith that necessarily leads to totalitarian superfluosity: she fails to recognize that within this Tradition are competing traditions.

The individual and conscience

What we must consider is how 'conscience' is understood and configured. If conscience is considered to be something innate to each and every person, that, in Enlightenment fashion, is present, but perhaps requires cultivation, then politics becomes a ground for the expression of conscience. Social institutions attempt to recognize this conscience, and we are in a position where we may critique said institutions on the grounds that they are not doing their job well enough, that human conscience has perhaps been misunderstood; that its expression is not protected well-enough. This is not, however, what I see as Arendt's stance. Instead, for Arendt, 'conscience' takes on the character of necessarily affirming the national-capital project, and thus loses its meaning as a point of resistance and critique. Conscience becomes less an innate attribute of 'humanness,' but becomes, in itself, subject to regulation and restriction.

‘Conscience’ is something less than freely-determined, but is instead, something that is inherently a product of culture, broadly understood. But if Arendt is indeed correct in this analysis, then the only way of reclaiming conscience as this ‘innate’ quality is to do away with the Tradition *tout court*. And why? For the simple reason that all notions of conscience which emerge in this modern period are polluted and obfuscated by a national-capital spirit: conscience is what links us to community. Without a social position, one seems, in Arendt’s calculus, unable to *think*. Now, the problem is—and I think this is very unclear in Arendt’s works—whether the problem of conscience/superfluosity is one that emerges *because of* modernity itself, or whether she is actually suggesting that the practice of modern politics has made this relationship between conscience and the person go awry. Perhaps Arendt herself is not entirely certain of this distinction. But the distinction is an important one, and not simply for philosophical reasoning. How the relationship between conscience and its political expression is operationalized will have clear and immediate effects on the types of critiques we engage, and hence, upon how we categorize ‘modern crises’ and what remedies we might employ to generate a ‘best society.’

Antisemitism

Arendt traces the condition of ‘superfluosity’ back to the situation of the Jew, a situation we have already encountered in *Rahel Varnhagen*, and she uses the situation of the Jew as an entrée into what we might call the hypocrisy of the

modern condition. As we saw with *Rahel*, the European Jew exists “in the void.”¹⁴ In *Totalitarianism*, Arendt demonstrates how this anti-Semitism conditioned the acceptance of pushing even more people into this void: the Jew may be the first victim, but he is quickly followed many other ‘surplus’ people.

There is no need here to rehearse the history of European Jewry. The important moment for this discussion is that which Arendt identifies as when “[t]he regime no longer needed the Jews as much as before, since it was now possible to achieve through Parliament a financial expansion beyond the wildest dreams of the former more or less absolute or constitutional monarchs.”¹⁵ The body politic casts the Jew aside because he no longer holds any *utility* for the regime: *modern* anti-semitism is not the result of ‘othering’ or atavistic beliefs. Whereas once (at least a certain class of) Jews could count on certain protections and privileges due to their essential role in financing the courts of Europe in a personal relationship, once modern Parliaments took hold, this special relationship was no neither desired nor required. Capital was released from aristocratic bonds; the oversight of state finances was regularized via parliamentary institutions. The Jew, whose only role had been that of the ‘Court Jew,’ no longer had a place in the social hierarchy. Indeed, the role the Jew had relied upon as protection—that of a group of international, cosmopolitan financiers—would come back to further push him aside: ‘international Jewry’ interfering with the interest of the State becomes the justification cited by the anti-Semite. Of course, this only details how the upper class of European Jewry

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 14

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 97

came to be superfluous. But in this case, as goes the upper class, so goes the lower: the category 'Jew' becomes far more important than that of social class.

Perhaps our best approach to begin understanding what Arendt intends by the theme of 'superfluousness' is to recall the plight of Rahel Varnhagen. As discussed earlier, Rahel's life is marked by never being able to find a place to 'fit' in society. Because of the inescapable fact of her Jewishness, she was never able to create a life for herself: she was always caught between being a pariah or a parvenu. Her existence was never hers to claim for herself: she was, in other words, caught in existential superfluousness. Her dilemma was that of depending upon others for the expression of this existence: she was determined to find a 'true' being, yet was never able to come to terms within herself as to what this 'true' being consisted of. Hers is a highly romanticized—and hence abstracted—understanding of Being. Yet it is undoubtedly one that is all too common in the conditions of the modern, and is Arendt's warning to us not to be so caught up in this 'spectacle of inner life.' For when we do become caught up in this inner spectacle, we fail to recognize the world around us, the world that is conditioning and imposing an existence upon us. *Rahel* thus presents us with a portrait of what it is to feel psychologically superfluous—*lost*—in the world. With *Rahel*, we gain insight into what *feeling* superfluous is; but this is not yet drawn into the realm of the political. Rahel would be simply a tragic-comic study on its own; only once Arendt draws the lessons of *Rahel* into a larger schema can we recognize its importance.

But it is here, in the pariah status of *all* Jews, regardless of social status, that the political ramifications become clear from Arendt's perspective. Jews—whatever their social status—were, as we saw in *Rahel Varnhagen*, always under the imperative to assimilate or forever be a pariah. *Individual* Jews may benefit from Enlightened notions of emancipation, but as a group, as a class, they were without the rights of the citizen. What Arendt points out in describing the *legal* treatment of Jews by the emergent modern states of Europe is not merely the discrimination against the Jews, but rather, that the ideas of equality, of citizen, of the rights of 'man,' are not absolutes. Rather, these words, these concepts that we take as the markers of modernity and emancipation lose their universal quality and become distinctly tied to the idea of 'nation':

The same essential rights were at once claimed as the inalienable heritage of all human beings *and* as the specific heritage of specific nations, the same nation was at once declared to be subject to laws, which supposedly would flow from the Rights of Man, *and* sovereign, that is, bound by no universal law and acknowledging nothing superior to itself. The practical outcome of this contradiction was that from then on human rights were protected and enforced only as national rights and that the very institution of a state, whose supreme task was to protect and guarantee man his rights as man, as citizen and as national, lost its legal, rational appearance and could be interpreted by the romantics as the nebulous representative of a "national soul" which through the very fact of its existence was supposed to be beyond or above the law. National sovereignty, accordingly, lost its original connotation of freedom of the people and was being surrounded by a pseudomystical aura of lawless arbitrariness.¹⁶

For while Rahel may represent individual pathos, and is thus rather unremarkable, what becomes of the situation when that pathos is repeated *ad infinitum*? Moreover, can such individual pathos be given concreteness? That is,

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 230-31

can we move beyond it being something idiosyncratic and personal, and instead find ways to attribute it to a larger condition? Superfluousness, for Arendt, is tied directly to the *massification* of society, but Arendt's mass man is not the willing joiner of movements. Rather, he exists in isolation and with a sense of individual moral failure:

In this atmosphere of the breakdown of class society the psychology of the European mass man developed. The fact that with monotonous but abstract uniformity the same fate had befallen a mass of individuals did not prevent their judging themselves in terms of individual failure or the world in terms of specific injustice. This self-centered bitterness, however, although repeated again and again in individual isolation, was not a common bond despite its tendency to extinguish individual differences, because it was based on no common interest, economic or social or political. Self-centeredness, therefore, went hand in hand with a decisive weakening of the instinct for self-preservation...[mass men] lost interest in their own well-being.¹⁷

The state, the people, and community

This is where the apparatus of the state comes in, an apparatus that insists upon the equality of 'its people' against all others. The state generates community. For Arendt then, superfluousness emerges in tandem with the rise of the modern state. And this, it seems to me, puts her in a rather awkward position, for now she must deny the modern operationalization of the state while at the same time support that very modern incarnation: the individual.

Now we come to Arendt's rather confusing insight into the 'nature' of the modern individual: on the one hand, the ideal of equality focuses on the individual, refusing to allow him to construct 'common bonds' with others likewise

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 315

situated. Yet this equality *also* demands allegiance to ‘constructed’ communities —particularly those of race or nation in such a way that

The more equal conditions are, the less explanation there is for the differences that actually exist between people; and thus all the more unequal do individuals and groups become...The perversion of equality from a political into a social concept is all the more dangerous when a society leaves but little space for special groups and individuals, for then their differences become all the more conspicuous.¹⁸

That is, it seems that for Arendt, modernity culminates in an attempt to deny any form of difference in the idea of the ‘people’; that the ‘people’ to truly be a ‘people’ must transform into a bland conformity. The Jew then becomes the test case. If he can be excluded—that is, seen as not belonging to the ‘universal’ community, then can others, when they too have lost their utility, have become undesirable, also be excluded? What Arendt thus uncovers is that, despite liberal promises of the rights of man extended to individuals, rights are instead granted on the basis of group-belonging. And here, we might want to refer to liberal understanding of the citizen as ‘equal’ under the law. Yet for Arendt, this is what is driving us apart: equality for her becomes massification, which in turn leads to mobification, where each stands in isolation from all others.

...the mob...was composed actually of the refuse of all classes. This composition made it seem that the mob and its representatives had abolished class differences, that those standing outside the class-divided nation were the people itself...rather than its distortion and caricature...the mob is not only the refuse but also the by-product of bourgeois society, directly produced by it and therefore never quite separable from it.¹⁹

The ‘artifice’ of society thus becomes not one of considered construction of a community with varied interests, but of eliminating the notion of ‘interests’ itself.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 54

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 155

The protection of conscience, then, becomes less about the protection of thought as the protection of *belonging*. This, in short, is what I see as her critique of modernity. The promise of modernity is that it allows for the flourishing of this individual conscience; yet what becomes problematic is this issue Arendt first points to here: what happens when conscience cannot be guaranteed, when one loses his place because he no longer fits into a place deemed appropriate by this nationalist-capitalist impulse?

And, for Arendt, there is a very clear reason for pushing people into this superfluous state, and herein we find the hypocrisy of modernity: it is the structure of the state itself, emerging from the French Revolution, wherein:

The whole question of human rights, therefore, was quickly and inextricably blended with the question of human emancipation; only the emancipated sovereignty of the people, of one's own people, seemed to be able to insure them. As mankind, since the French Revolution, was conceived in the image of a family of nations, *it gradually became self-evident that the people, and not the individual, was the image of man.*²⁰

Here is where we get the first inklings of what will become a major theme of Arendt's: the misappropriation of the economy by politics. The state, as legitimator and protector of the Rights of Man, is imperiled by the capitalist impulse, and the purpose of the state is now seen as "...only a well-organized police force."²¹ The 'nation,' rather than the individual, becomes what requires protection.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 291 italics mine

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 138

Imperialism

Imperialism was born when the ruling class in capitalist production came up against national limitation to its economic expansion. The bourgeoisie turned to politics out of economic necessity; for if it did not want to give up the capitalist system whose inherent law is constant economic growth, it had to impose this law upon its home governments and to proclaim expansion to be an ultimate political goal of foreign policy.²²

But is there really anything new in this analysis? Arendt claims that we must see imperialism as "...the first stage in political rule of the bourgeoisie rather than the last stage of capitalism."²³ It would seem that, from an economic perspective, these are equivalent: the expansion of capital requires the laws to ensure this may occur; laws benefiting capital expansion will only come about when the interests of the bourgeoisie supercede all others. The claim she does make from this perspective that we must consider is that imperialism is *not political*.²⁴

This is a rather extraordinary claim. It is even more extraordinary in that she pushes it even further by saying that imperialism, politically speaking, takes on the character of capital in capitalism, where power²⁵ becomes what must be sought after in ever-increasing amounts:

The new feature of this imperialist political philosophy is not the predominant place it gave violence, nor the discovery that power is one of the basic political realities...neither had ever before been the conscious aim of the body politic or the ultimate goal of any definite policy. For power left to itself can achieve nothing but more power, and violence administered for power's (and not law's) sake turns into a destructive principle that will not stop until there is nothing left to violate.

²² *ibid.*, p. 126

²³ *ibid.*, p. 138

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 123

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 137

This contradiction...takes on an appearance of sense if one understands it in the context of a supposedly permanent process which has no end or aim but itself. Then the test of achievement can indeed become meaningless and power can be thought of as the never-ending, self-feeding motor of all political action that corresponds to the legendary unending accumulation of money that begets money...its logical consequence is the destruction of all living communities, those of the conquered peoples as well as of the people at home.²⁶

'Power,' as a conceptual device, as a political tool, is now distinctly tied not to the sovereignty of the individual, nor to classes or to groups, but to the state.

Perhaps we should say that power has become synonymous with *raison d'état*.

The state, as a thing-in-itself, takes precedence over the community which it governs: "[p]ower became the essence of political action and the center of political thought when it was separated from the political community which it should serve."²⁷ And thus, the modern state becomes marked less by its emancipatory potential, than by its claim to power, where power is seen as "...the essence of every political structure."²⁸

And now Arendt can make the move to connect imperialism with totalitarianism by way of antisemitism. 'Power' in the imperialist conception combines with that idea of 'nation,' where the community of people now takes on not just a symbolic character, but is linked to destiny itself: "[Nationalism] claims its people to be unique, individual, incompatible with all others, and denies theoretically the very possibility of a common mankind long before it is used to destroy the humanity of man."²⁹ And hence, just as the Jew became superfluous

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 137

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 138

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 137

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 227

to the apparatus of the modern state, the logic of imperialism, in its nationalist guise, adopted a stance of a hierarchical ordering of these nations, where “...differences of history and organization were misinterpreted as differences between men, residing in natural origin.”³⁰

It is here that Arendt makes her most interesting turn: in likening imperialism to the European Pan-movements and nationalism, she articulates why and how ‘national interest’ came to be placed above class interests. Specifically, what comes into play here—though Arendt does not use this language—is that of competing identity configurations. The thread Arendt wants us to focus on is that of the importance of a specifically *national* identity, an identity in which “...that peculiar identification of nationality with one’s own soul emerge[s], that turned-inward pride that is no longer concerned only with public affairs but pervades every phase of private life until, for example, ‘the private life of each true Pole...is a public life of Polishness.’”³¹ Specifically, however, Arendt seems to blame *class interests* on this national identity formation:

In both [French, German] cases, patriotism meant an abandonment of one’s party and partial interests in favor of the government and the national interest. The point is that such nationalistic deformation was almost inevitable in a system that created political parties out of private interests, so that the public good had to depend upon force from above and a vague generous self-sacrifice from below which could be achieved only by arousing nationalistic passions...the more, therefore, the party system on the Continent corresponded to class interests, the more urgent was the need of the nation for nationalism, for some popular expression and support of national interests.³²

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 234

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 226

³² *ibid.*, p. 254

Thus, in Arendt's interpretation, nationalism emerges as a counter to the divisiveness of class politics. Because of their ingrained interests, class-based parties could speak neither to people outside of that class nor to the collectivity as a whole. And hence, the rise of the nation permits escape from what appears to be deep impasses held in society. Nationalism appears as a means by which politics can be saved from itself, in that discourse moves from what might be considered 'narrow' interests to the interests of the grandeur of the Nation. And in this we find a parallel superfluosity, now writ on 'the people' as a whole: a way out, preventing the loss of unique culture from the ravaging maw of class conflict, comes to be a focal point of a 'progressive' politics. The trajectory from anti-semitism to totalitarianism becomes clear, and there is no mistake in the "...irresistible appeal of the totalitarian movements' spurious claim to have abolished the separation between private and public life and to have restored a mysterious irrational wholeness in man."³³

When superfluosity exceeds the utility-dimension of capitalism and shifts its weight to the mystical connotation of nation, superfluosity is no longer merely structural, but becomes psychological. When a worker is laid off, or an entire economic sector becomes obsolete, we can, with great certitude, point to the dynamics of capital to explain why this has happened. But how does one explain what it is to be Polish? It is a feeling, and nothing more. So perhaps we can manipulate this, through the propaganda of a 'civil religion.' But even with this, there is nothing to guarantee that a person will internally become that

³³ *ibid.*, p. 336

whole being of 'Polish.' And while there may well be some rich psychology to be plumbed in this, our concern is with the *politics* of it. Obviously, chauvinism is an outcome, but what of this reversal of the public/private divide? This is the crux of the issue, and one that Arendt will continue to ruminate on in her later works. But the most important thing to note is that when the psychological becomes entwined with the political, *it becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint what is properly private and what is properly public.* It is the situation wherein

...Judaism became a psychological quality and the Jewish question became an involved personal problem for every individual Jew...As long as defamed peoples and classes exist, parvenu—and pariah—qualities will be produced anew by each generation with incomparable monotony, in Jewish society and everywhere else.³⁴

It is perhaps obvious how sentiments of nationalism and national identity can lead to the creation of 'superfluous' peoples. 'National identity' relies upon casting those outside of the group as 'Other,' as incapable of understanding, for example, a 'Polish soul.' Indeed, this question of knowing the soul of others within the national group becomes the hallmark of identification; no longer can citizenship be based on mere territoriality, nor is it even a principled like-mindedness (such as sharing the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity), but instead congratulates itself in a nebulous—and mythic—national character. Retrieval of the wholeness of the national soul thus comes depend upon emphasizing 'the people,' a people who has become a mob, who have already been made superfluous, and thus, is seized by the mob. Politics is turned over to those who have no 'care for the world.' And so Arendt can make the claim to a

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 66

break in the Tradition. For the first time in human history, politics has fallen into the hands of those who prefer to destroy civilization rather than care for the progress of humanity.

If Arendt is correct in her analysis of totalitarianism, then we do indeed seem to face an impossible future. For once we are encumbered with 'superfluousness,' can the 'reasonable individual' be reclaimed?

The culprit and the solution

Throughout *Totalitarianism* Arendt suggests that ideological commitment substitutes dogmatic belief for actual thought: one allows the program to think for you, rather than you thinking for yourself. This, I argue, is significantly damaging to the idea of politics, for, if we cannot use ideology, how then are we to enter into political discourse? Arendt's concern is that ideology destroys the 'reasonable individual,' and it is this loss of the reasonable individual that permits totalitarianism. Thus, for Arendt, our escape from the totalitarianism is found in developing a sustainable model of a reasonable individual. That is, her reasonable individual must be able to confront a future in which totalitarianism and superfluousness are very real possibilities. This establishes the theme of the remainder of this chapter: how does Arendt go about constructing this reasonable individual? Specifically, however, I want to question what seems to be her elision of ideology and 'unreasonability.'

For Arendt, the reclamation of a reasonable individual is necessarily political—a political situation requires a political response. And to this end, her response to what constitutes a reasonable individual is fairly straightforward: it is a person who is willing to take responsibility for ‘care of the world.’ Superficially, this may seem to be good enough. However, Arendt has made a grave error because she condemns totalitarianism as the result of modernity’s generation of people who think and act programmatically. That is, Arendt sees the adoption of ‘ideological’ thinking as the death-knell of reasonable individuals. My response is that while ideology *may* lead to horrors, that is not necessarily the case. Rather, what is necessary is the principled refusal of confusing ‘ideology’ with teleology. Humanity’s problem, far too often, has been the attempt to impose a City of God in the *saeculum* without recognizing the dialectical relationship between the two. Specifically, I believe that Arendt has read the meaning of ideology back through the very specific experience of totalitarian regimes, and has conflated that which is specific to totalitarianism with the ‘ideology’ in general.

Of course, Arendt is not the only thinker of modernity to fall into this trap, wherein totalitarianism becomes the *starting* point of interpretation; it is, undoubtedly a common theme, particularly with those associated with the ‘Frankfurt School.’ Arendt, does, of course, differ from them in significant ways, and so we should take care not to elide Arendt’s perspectives with those of, for example, Adorno and Horkheimer. It is not ‘The Enlightenment’ (or, modernity), *per se*, that is the villain for Arendt, but rather, that we seem to have forgotten the universalism of the Enlightenment, focusing instead of socially-determined

groups.³⁵ But even Arendt's villain, while perhaps more well-tempered than the outright rejection of Enlightenment, is still problematic, for here, in reading backward from totalitarianism, she only sees the 'mood' or psychology of the totalitarian impulse. That is, while anomie and alienation are perhaps important components of the story, the manner in which politics—*power*—was used to generate superfluosness is largely neglected. In reading *Totalitarianism*, and its accounts of the generation of superfluosness, power, and why it was used so apparently against the interests of so many, seems amorphous, beyond the control of anyone or any institutions. Again, perhaps, the problem of Arendt's glossing of the 'brass tacks,' but the consequence here, that I raise, is that it makes resolution of her concerns very difficult, if not impossible. For, if, as in Arendt's account, totalitarianism emerges out of a miasmic swamp of misconstrued and deviated Enlightenment principles, it would seem that no *political* response can be written. Indeed, the only response Arendt can make is this argument to ideological thinking, while failing to recognize that not all ideology is alike. Rather,

Fascism³⁶ was not the product of some philosophical dialectic of enlightenment, but rather a self-conscious response to the Enlightenment and its two progressive political offspring, liberalism and socialism, by the successor to the Counter-Enlightenment.³⁷

³⁵ This shall be taken up in more detail in Chapter 6, On Revolution: The Crisis of Conscience.

³⁶ Of course, Arendt places both fascism and communism together under the heading of 'totalitarianism.' From the perspective of superfluosness, this placement is perhaps accurate enough, insofar that people were treated as means to an (absolute) end. But that we can categorize them together is perhaps symptomatic of Arendt's flawed thought. For if we take 'superfluosness' as the marker of the crisis of civilization, then, indeed, much of civilization becomes 'totalitarian,' and the distinctiveness of modernity is lost.

³⁷ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2004 p. 113

But this is not how Arendt interprets the political history of 'ideology.' Arendt understands 'ideology' to be relatively recent phenomenon.³⁸ The emergence of 'ideological' politics she attributes to "...the refusal to view or accept anything 'as it is' and in the consistent interpretation of everything as being only a stage of some further development."³⁹ Thus, in the midst of the upheavals generating superfluousness, in a world in which stability could not be taken for granted, ideology appeared to offer a sort of comfort in that "...it claims to possess either the key to history, or the solution for all 'riddles of the universe,' or the intimate knowledge of the hidden universal laws which are supposed to rule nature and man..."⁴⁰

But what perhaps is most about interesting about Arendt's thoughts on ideology is that she does not limit her commentary to those totalitarian ideologies, fascism and communism. Instead, she makes the claim that it is only because of these totalitarian movements that we can discern the danger of *all* ideological movements and thought:

The truth is rather that the real nature of all ideologies was revealed only in the role that the ideology plays in the apparatus of totalitarian domination. Seen from this aspect, there appear three specifically totalitarian elements that are peculiar to all ideological thinking.

First, in their claim to total explanation, ideologies have the tendency to explain not what is, but what becomes, what is born and passes away. They are in all cases concerned solely with the element of motion, that is, with history in the customary sense of the word...Secondly, in this capacity ideological thinking becomes independent of all experience from which it cannot learn anything new even if it is a question of something that has just come to pass. Hence ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, 1969, op. cit., p. 468

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 464

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 159

senses, and insists on a “truer” reality concealed behind all perceptible things, dominating them from this place of concealment and requiring a sixth sense that enables us to become aware of it. The sixth sense is provided by precisely the ideology... Thirdly, since the ideologies have no power to transform reality, they achieve this emancipation of thought from experience through certain methods of demonstration. Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality...⁴¹

This is undoubtedly a quite damning statement. It is of little wonder that George Kateb characterizes ideologies in Arendt as “poisonous fictions.”⁴² But this is a rather narrow reading of ‘ideology,’ for she is here throwing all political traditions into one pot, failing to recognize that ideologies can be viewed as either ‘progressive’ or ‘reactionary.’

There is much that is peculiar in this reasoning on ideology, most particularly with regard to how Arendt has apparently elided ideology with what the ‘Archimedean viewpoint.’ For Arendt, ideology replaces thought and judgment, and hence, removes man even further from care of the world. For, as noted above, ideology for Arendt does not represent some means of attacking and critiquing the world as it is in some attempt to form a ‘best society,’ but instead is a fantasy, perhaps condemning all attempts to engage a ‘best society.’

Throwing all ideologies together this way will prove to be the greatest impediment to her theory: without ideology, we cannot translate political goods into political goals. For what Arendt sees in ideology is not the content of an ideology’s critique, but rather its method, a method she claims is a form of logical

⁴¹ *ibid*, pp. 470-71

⁴² George Kateb, “Fiction as Poison,” in Roger Berkowitz et al, eds. *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, New York: Fordham University Press. 2010. p. 30

absolutism, where “[t]he tyranny of logicity begins with the mind’s submission to logic as a never-ending process, on which man relies in order to engender his thoughts. By this submission, he surrenders his inner freedom...”⁴³ We are, in other words, refusing to see the world in its complex reality when we engage the ideological, for our ‘reality’ will always be tainted by viewing it through the lens of the ‘ideal’ that we want to invoke. Ideologically committed individuals can thus never be reasonable individuals, for they have disengaged themselves from their own freedom of thought: they have, in Arendt’s view, forsaken their own conscience in the pursuit of an ideal.

Arendt’s theme thus becomes present: organizing political beliefs according to a single premise—*any* single premise—is ‘thinking *with* banisters.’ When we think with banisters in this way, we fail to live up to our full human potential. We allow ourselves to become a means to an end, rather than ends in ourselves. Ideologies thus become a further way of blinding us to the human condition, acting as ‘banisters’ that direct thought, rather than allowing us to think freely. Ideologies thus become a form of modern ‘banalization’. Thus, Kateb sums the lesson we may take away from Arendt on this subject:

...we should always expect the worst in political life because human beings live by simplified ideas and distorted reduction, by ideologies, fictions, stories, patterns, and images that enchant them. Enchanted, they will do great wrongs while convinced that they are conceiving or doing great deeds.⁴⁴

Thus, Arendt believes that ideology has corrupted the ability for an individual to be ‘reasonable’; it closes us off from alternatives, to new, unthought-of

⁴³ Hannah Arendt, 1968, op. cit., p. 473

⁴⁴ George Kateb, 2010, op. cit., p. 32

experiences. This is the larger issue that shall be taken up later. For the moment, I want to think about this problem within the scenario of *Totalitarianism* itself.

Here, we need to recall, from Chapter One, Arendt's configuration of the neighbor: Arendt transforms the Augustinian neighbor from all his concrete complexity to that of his abstract 'perfectibility.' This is, I believe, the devilishly tricky detail that lingers throughout Arendt's work insofar as she desperately *wants* the neighbor, in all his complex, sticky, humanness to play a role in her theory. Yet when it comes down to brass tacks, time and again, she defaults to this figure of the perfectible neighbor. This may ultimately be why Arendt's theory is so uneven, but for the moment, I want to concentrate on how this plays out in the question of ideology as presented in *Totalitarianism*. For what I see here is Arendt judging the meaning and relevance of ideology through this standard of 'perfectibility.' Perhaps it is somewhat counterintuitive, but the problem for Arendt is that she sees ideology as leading away from perfectibility, where the 'perfect' is understood as this reasonable individual, thinking for himself, caring for the world. Ideology thus becomes a part of the *saeculum*, that from which, for Arendt, we need to move away. And hence, we come to the counterintuitive problem ideology causes in Arendt's political thought: while wanting to present a politics that strips bare all the 'banisters' which we use to confront politics, she discards the stickiness that is ideology. As we shall see, she does this again with the 'social.' In other words, while Arendt advocates and examines concrete politics, she continually pulls all that is concrete out from under us, pushing us

further into the realm of abstract response. *Why* politics is lived and experienced becomes a lesser question for her than *how* politics is lived and experienced: she doesn't seem to care as much about what people want from political life, but rather, that politics becomes something that can be psychologically fulfilling.

However, there is something I would like to ask of Arendt, and that is whether, in this assessment of ideological thinking, she has perhaps neglected to recall the ways in which 'ideological' thinking *did* suggest resistance under totalitarianism. In the picture she has painted in her analysis, there is no room for independent thought to coexist with ideological thought, where independence means thinking contrary to the absolute power of totalitarianism. At the end of the day, Arendt argues that ideology, in her totalitarian reading of it, "...overrule[s] all objections of individual conscience. The particular reality of the individual person appears against the background of a spurious reality of the general and universal, shrinks into a negligible quantity or is submerged in the stream of dynamic movement of the universal itself."⁴⁵ But this fails to explain those small and large moments of resistance—such as those related in Victor Klemperer's diaries, or that of organized Resistance in occupied territories.

The problem with eliminating ideology is that it prevents discussion of what is the 'best society.' When ideology is eliminated, we are not left with any sort of focal point around which to coalesce our principles and interests. If anything, without ideology, we become even more atomized and 'lonely.' This is a problem rooted in her reading ideology back through totalitarianism: because

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, 1968, op. cit., p. 249

she sees all ideologies as becoming potentially totalitarian, she must discard them all. But this neglects recognizing the critical usefulness of ideologies, of ideologies as being entry points for discussing what is wanted from the 'best society.'

Chapter Four

Eichmann In Jerusalem: The Crisis of Conscience

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, arguably Arendt's most lucid work, we learn what it means to be banal in the modern world. It is a subtle lesson for us to draw upon: conscience has gone astray and that thoughtlessness is the modern form of evil. Indeed, the problem she addresses with *Eichmann* is that we, as a culture, have placed too much faith in *individual* conscience providing the framework for a world fit for human habitation. For what I see as the message of *Eichmann* is that, for Arendt, 'conscience' is too precious a commodity to be tied exclusively to the individual. Rather, conscience must, for her, be configured as something requiring *collective* scrutiny: conscience itself, when fixed as an individual property, becomes banal and unreliable.

Arendt is, of course, notorious for having portrayed Eichmann as a clown, not a monster,¹ with the implication being that there is only a thin veneer that prevents each of us from becoming an Eichmann. What makes Arendt's Eichmann so very shocking is his ordinariness: "The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal."²

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York and London: Penguin Books. 1977 p. 54

² *ibid.*, p. 276

Indeed, this rubs us the wrong way, insofar that Nazism equates with radical evil in the popular imagination: to suggest a Nazi is 'ordinary' erodes this equation. But popular imagination also likes to assess Nazism as some sort of 'perfect storm' of German culture. Obviously, this is an unsatisfactory position, both for its lack of explanatory value and for its 'convenience.' However, this utterly convenient explanation is perhaps telling when it comes to Arendt's argument in *Eichmann*, for it is the explanation that evades responsibility. For, according to Arendt, we must confront the discomfiting recognition that we take "...vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among many men..."³ And so emerges the intriguing insight I suggest Arendt wants us to consider: How do we take responsibility for Eichmann? For, while Eichmann may have brought evil into the world, our responsibility is to respond appropriately to Eichmann's acts.

Eichmann thus expands Arendt's focus: it is not just the totalitarian, the Eichmann, who deserves condemnation. Rather—and this is perhaps what makes this book so compelling—it is that she develops her argument to condemn all lapses into 'easy' thinking. For, in her recounting of the Eichmann trial, there are no 'heroes': the Jerusalem court is just as guilty of banality as is Eichmann. For, in her reckoning, the court failed its responsibility, insofar that

...the physical extermination of the Jewish people, *was a crime against humanity, perpetrated upon the body of the Jewish people*, and that only the choice of victims, not the nature of the crime, could be

³ Hannah Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," (1968) in *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken Books. 1983 p. 158

derived from the long history of Jew-hatred and anti-Semitism...insofar *as the crime was a crime against humanity, it needed an international tribunal to do justice to it.*⁴

Instead, in Arendt's eyes, "...this case was built on what the Jews had suffered, not on what Eichmann had done,"⁵ and thus, the court missed a decisive opportunity to improve the fitness of the world. It was "...not Eichmann, nor Nazis, but anti-semitism on trial."⁶

Herein lies our entry to thinking about the banal. How often do we fail to reflect on our circumstances, to recognize our 'moments of decision'? For what I see Arendt articulating here is that we must learn to think in terms of what each one of us decides to write upon that 'blank slate' of our lives: the 'banality of evil' resides in the refusal to think about what one writes upon one's 'blank slate.' She is, I believe, asking us to resist the trap of banality by returning to that Augustinian *quaestio*. That is, refusing banality begins with asking: 'How do I, under the conditions of modernity, remain a question unto myself?' For it is only in acknowledging the *quaestio*, that, I believe, we can respond to Arendt's pointed (and undoubtedly correct) accusation: "...behind the unwillingness to judge lurks the suspicion that no one is a free agent, and hence the doubt that anyone is responsible or could be expected to answer for what he has done."⁷

In other words, the banality Arendt recognizes in the modern condition is a *choice*. To refuse banality is to maintain a stance of questioning. That is,

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. op. cit., p. 269 (emphasis mine)

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 6

⁶ Michael R. Marrus "Eichmann in Jerusalem: Justice and History," in Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem. Steve E. Aschheim (ed.) Berkeley: University of California Press. 2001 p. 208

⁷ Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," (1964) in *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken Books. 1983. pp. 19-20

refusing banality is to recognize the limits of our understanding, and to push up against these limits, questioning the limit itself. Arendt wants us to recognize that we cannot simply attribute our choices to 'conscience,' but instead must be willing to question that on which our conscience is based.

Eichmann's refusal

As Arendt presents him, Eichmann is exemplary in his ordinariness, and as such, represents the consummate 'average man' of modernity. He just wants to be left alone in a daily routine, neither justifying nor making demands on his existence. He lives the utmost complacent life, disconnected even from the apparatus he is caught up in. As Arendt presents it, he has not even openly chosen to 'do evil,' or act as a committed believer in Nazism; "[h]e *merely, ...never realized what he was doing.*"⁸ It is, however, precisely this apparent *lack* of choice that Arendt wants to direct our attention. For to actively make a choice, to commit one way or another, would indicate that individual conscience has come into the picture. But herein lies the problem for Arendt: modernity has made accessing conscience difficult, if not impossible for the majority:

What we have called the 'bourgeois' is the modern man of the masses, not in his exalted moments of collective excitement, but in the security (today one should say the insecurity) of his own private domain. He has driven the dichotomy of private and public functions, of family and occupation, so far that he can no longer find in his own person any connection between the two. When his occupation forces him to murder people he does not regard himself as a murderer because he has not done it out of inclination

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. op. cit., p. 287

but in his professional capacity. Out of sheer passion he would never do harm to a fly.⁹

Eichmann becomes the exemplar of the modern crisis of conscience. As portrayed by Arendt, Eichmann does not recognize the horror that he generates, but he is a fine 'career' man: "...[he] remembered the turning points of his career rather well, but they did not necessarily coincide with the turning points in the story of Jewish extermination or, as a matter of fact, with the turning points in history."¹⁰ Jews might as well be widgets. As widgets, Eichmann could make a career out of 'managing' the Jews, and thus he easily accommodated his changing 'job description' from specialist in Jewish affairs to organizing the transports. It was all perfectly clear:

When, a year later, the Madagascar project was declared to have become 'obsolete,' everybody was psychologically, or rather, logically, prepared for the next step: since there existed no territory to which one could 'evacuate,' the only 'solution' was extermination.¹¹

Of course, what is missing from his recollections was that his job objective was to eliminate Jews from society.

But Eichmann refuses to acknowledge that he played a significant role in the destruction of European Jewry. Indeed, his resolve that he is an 'innocent' is most disturbing, for "...he was perfectly sure that he was not what he called an *innerer Schweinehund*, a dirty bastard in the depths of his heart; and as for his conscience, he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad

⁹ Hannah Arendt, "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," (1945) in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Jerome Kohn, ed. New York: Schocken Books. 1994 p. 130

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. op. cit., p. 53

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 77

conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to..."¹² In other words, he did just as he thought was expected, he never considered that his 'career' was built on atrocity. And, even when confronted with historical fact, Eichmann's mind seemed to revert to a "...taped memory that showed itself to be proof against reason and argument and information and insight of any kind."¹³

In his "[c]lichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct..." Eichmann may not be so extraordinary, for "...these have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality..."¹⁴ This is, indeed, what makes him banal. And thus Arendt establishes her primary point: we will, as individuals, go to very great lengths to distort truth and deny responsibility. Eichmann has coiled himself so deeply into subjective interpretation of 'facts,' that he has lost any conscientious ability to make any sort of valid judgements. He is so lost in his own subjective interpretation of reality that it becomes impossible to even communicate with him on any common ground:

The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence reality as such.¹⁵

¹² *ibid.*, p. 25

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 78

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," (1971) in *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken Books. 1983 p. 160

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. *op. cit.*, p. 49

However, there is something much more disturbing that Arendt, I believe, identifies correctly: subjectivity leads to the distortion of Enlightenment reason.

As she reports, Eichmann confidently

...had not simply dismissed the Kantian formula as no longer applicable, he had distorted it to read: Act as if the principle of your actions were the same as that of the legislator or of the law of the land—or, in Hans Frank's formulation of 'the categorical imperative in the Third Reich,' which Eichmann might have known: 'Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it.' ¹⁶

Of course, "Kant, to be sure, had never intended to say anything of the sort..."¹⁷

But Eichmann insisted upon the correctness of this code. Rather than perceiving his horrible misinterpretation, he instead is baffled by the Jerusalem court:

His hopes for justice were disappointed; the court had not believed him, though he had always done his best to tell the truth. The court did not understand him: he had never been a Jew-hater, and he never willed the murder of human beings. His guilt came from his obedience, and obedience is praised as a virtue. His virtue had been abused by the Nazi leaders. But he was not one of the ruling clique, he was a victim, and only the leaders deserved punishment.¹⁸

And so Arendt presents us with, as exemplified by Eichmann, the upside-down process of 'thought' in the modern world. Totalitarianism, as we saw in the previous chapter, certainly exaggerates the closing off of thought. But now she wants us to see that, as a culture, we have substituted the independent, creative thought of Enlightenment reason with morality.

As Kateb describes Arendt's work, Eichmann exhibits "...an active and highly placed example of the morality of mores..." in which "[t]he morality of mores is not real morality and can therefore transform itself from the conformity

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 136

¹⁷ *idem.*

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. *op. cit.*, p. 247

that keeps normal society going into the conformity that allows and even encourages the ideological passions of a comparative few to create a whole system of evil.”¹⁹ And thus we can come to understand how Arendt could see ‘banality’ in evil. Eichmann is a case study in the failure of responsibility; he lacks any ability for reflective self-judgment whatsoever.

But Eichmann is merely a representative amongst many. And those many, were, like Eichmann, as far as Arendt is concerned, all too willing to turn their conscience against itself. As she diagnoses it,

...the problem was how to overcome not so much their conscience as the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering. The trick...was very simple and probably very effective; it consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!²⁰

And this is precisely what makes Eichmann such a troubling figure: there is an evil in *not* choosing just as much as there is in actively choosing evil. Or, to put it differently: had Eichmann actively advocated Nazism and genocide, he becomes a much more recognizable creature—a monster. Instead, by twisting his interpretations to protect his psyche, he becomes a cardboard representation of humanity. Lurking behind Arendt’s description is this sense that it was all too easy for Eichmann to become a mass murderer. And in this, I think Arendt is suggesting something very different than the interpretation that “[t]he implication of these reflections appears to be that if Eichmann had been capable of reflective

¹⁹ George Kateb, “Existential Values in Arendt’s Treatment of Evil and Morality,” *Social Research* Vol 74: No 3 : Fall 2007 811-854 p. 829

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. op. cit., p. 106

thinking, he could never have become a Nazi; the life of the mind would have immunized him from it.”²¹ Rather, as I view it, Arendt suggests that conscience itself that has become circumspect.

What I want to suggest it is not the lack of ‘reflective thinking’ on Eichmann’s part: he shows time and again a willingness to engage in perverted interpretations of his deeds. Instead, it is a misplaced conscience, the conscience of the anti-Semite as so clearly stated by Sartre:

He is a man who is afraid. Not of the Jews, to be sure, but of himself, of his own consciousness, of his liberty, of his instincts, of his responsibilities, of solitariness, of change, of society, and of the world—of everything except the Jews. He is a coward who does not want to admit his cowardice to himself; a murderer who represses and censures his tendency to murder without being able to hold it back, yet who dares to kill only in effigy or protected by the anonymity of the mob; a malcontent who dares not revolt from fear of the consequences of his rebellion. In espousing anti-Semitism, he does not simply adopt an opinion, he chooses himself as a person.²²

Sartre’s anti-Semite is one who, as I read it, has *refused* to make a choice, in that, while his angst is directed toward the Jew, it is because he is too cowardly to confront his own reality. That is, in a rather horrible amplification of Rahel Varnhagen’s romantic subjectivity, he denies the presence and existence of the world. Fear of the world, the need to protectively swaddle one’s Self in the conscience of ‘mores’ is a way of avoiding the angst that comes from having to make choices *and take responsibility for them* in the world.

²¹ Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 269

²² Jean-Paul Sartre, Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate. New York: Schocken Books. 1948 p. 53

‘Conscience,’ as an idea, as a referent point, thus seems to be what is in contention for Arendt. For what she suggests with Eichmann goes beyond ‘not thinking,’ but turning the idea of conscience upside down. Not only does he seem genuinely incapable of judging ‘good’ from ‘evil,’ but is incapable of even recognizing that he has choices. And herein is what seems to be the ‘banality of evil’: we no longer have the ability to distinguish that we have choices. Banality sees only immediacy.

The banality of justice

But it is not just that Eichmann displays an inverted conscience that worries Arendt. She is also concerned that we perhaps assume that there is some sort of ‘shared’ understanding as to what constitutes good and evil. That is, we assume that there must be some sort of standard which all individuals recognize and use in the making of judgments. And indeed, this idea that each person is capable of recognizing that certain behaviors are required if we are to live in an orderly, civilized world is unremarkable in itself. What underlies this idea, however, is what Arendt wants us to consider. For the Nazis turned acceptable socially-normative behaviors upside-down, and the remarkable aspect of this, for Arendt, was that so many were not just willing, but were *able* to acquiesce to the Nazi world order. Or, as Arendt so intriguingly puts it, they had learned to ‘resist temptation’:

...just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody 'Thou shalt not kill,' even though man's natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler's land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody: 'Thou shalt kill,'...Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it—the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted *not* to murder, *not* to rob, *not* to let their neighbors go off to their doom...and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation.²³

And in this, I think, Arendt is suggesting something both remarkable and disturbing: conscience, as a device of individual awareness, is very flimsily established. Conscience must be recognizable to others if it is to have validity in judgment-making; but conscience can be easily led astray (as in the German case), for, as she demonstrates above, there are disastrous effects when the object of temptation is shifted. But what is perhaps most remarkable in what Arendt identifies above is that *individual* conscience is unreliable: Nazism relied upon shifting the object of temptation *for an entire society*, and it was virtually impossible for any single person to resist. And thus the question, as identified by Michael Denny, arises for Arendt: "How can the individual judge matters of right and wrong for himself, without reliance on the general code established by society at large? To put it technically, can one judge the particular without reference to a general concept or a universal rule?"²⁴

²³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. op. cit., p. 150

²⁴ Michael Denny, "The Privilege of Ourselves: Hannah Arendt on Judgment," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, Melvyn A. Hill (ed.), New York: St. Martin's Press. 1979 p. 255

Thus, that to which Arendt wants to direct our attention: we have seemingly lost our ‘general code’ of self-governance. And while this may be most acutely seen at the individual level—the Eichmanns—she wants us to see something even more pernicious, that this lack of a ‘general code’ of conscience has made its way into legal realm of the State. That is, she makes an argument, via her observations of Eichmann’s trial, that the “subjective statements” of the “counsels of conscience”²⁵ have become legally permitted. In this, Arendt lines up an attack on that very body that is supposed to uphold universal rights: states, no more than individuals, can be presumed to act from conscience. Like individuals, states too will attempt to hide behind the ‘easy’ thought that assuages modern angst. The implied message I read in Arendt is that states, too, have inverted ‘conscience’ in pursuit of goals Arendt would perceive as ‘banal.’

Arendt addresses her concern for the conscience of the state through looking at what she interprets as the meaning of law and the intent of the legal apparatus. Her conclusion is that the Eichmann trial is something of a farce because the Israeli court refused to think beyond anti-Semitism. The Israeli court, in other words, fell into the banality of easy thought. Quite rightly, Arendt sets a high bar for the role of law: “...the law presupposes precisely that we have a common humanity with those whom we accuse and judge and condemn.”²⁶ Of course, what she reports from the trial is that this standard of ‘common humanity’ was ignored. Indeed, she goes so far as to suggest that the very idea of trying

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience”, in *Crises of the Republic*. New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1972 p. 62

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. op. cit., p. 252

Eichmann in court was merely for show, insofar that “[i]f he had not been found guilty before he appeared in Jerusalem, guilty beyond any reasonable doubt, the Israelis would never have dared, or wanted, to kidnap him...”²⁷

In the evidence Arendt collects, she pieces together an analysis that suggests that the Eichmann trial “...was established not in order to satisfy the demands of justice but to still the victims’ desire for and, perhaps, right to vengeance.”²⁸ And, in support of this, she points not just to the original kidnapping of Eichmann, but also to the lack of defense witnesses,²⁹ and to the “belie[f] that only a Jewish court could render justice to Jews, and that it was business of Jews to sit in judgment on their enemies. Hence the almost universal hostility in Israel to the mere mention of an international court...”³⁰ But, flawed as some of the procedure may have been, Arendt’s true qualms emerge with regard to what she sees as the court’s interpretation of ‘justice.’

For Arendt, as suggested above, has a very clear understanding of what the law and ‘justice’ are to provide. Law and justice are to provide the limits to what civilized society is willing to accept; when such limits are trespassed, the harm is to the community as a whole, not just to the victims of the crime:

...just as a murderer is prosecuted because he has violated the law of the community, and not because he has deprived the Smith family of its husband, father and breadwinner, so these modern state-employed mass murderers must be prosecuted because they violated the order of mankind, and not because they killed millions of people. Nothing is more pernicious to an understanding of these new crimes, or stands more in the way of the emergence of an

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 209

²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 260-61

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 221

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 7

international penal code that could take care of them, than the common illusion that the crime of murder and the crime of genocide are essentially the same, and that the latter therefore is 'no new crime properly speaking.' The point of the latter is that an altogether different order is broken and an altogether different community is violated.³¹

The Jerusalem court, in Arendt's view, refused to accept the new, refused to accept that the trial had any scope beyond that of the Jewish people. Indeed, a part of the story Arendt tells is that of the court relying upon subjectivity rather than universalism, that the purpose was less about condemning genocide for the purposes of 'common humanity' than about an emotional purge. For

[i]t was not with respect to the accused, then, but with respect to the background witnesses that the fact of the Jewishness of the judges, of their living in a country where every fifth person was a survivor, became acute and troublesome. Mr. Hausner had gathered together a "tragic multitude" of sufferers, each of them eager not to miss this unique opportunity, each of them convinced of his right to his day in court.³²

And of these cries for vengeance, Arendt is highly critical. For as she summarizes, such vengeance-taking is the very antithesis of civilized behavior; indeed, it is barbarism:

We refuse, and consider as barbaric, the propositions 'that a great crime offends nature, so that the very earth cries out for vengeance; that evil violates a natural harmony which only retribution can restore; that a wronged collectivity owes a duty to the moral order to punish the criminal.' And yet I think it is undeniable that it was precisely on the ground of these long-forgotten propositions that Eichmann was brought to justice to begin with, and that they were, in fact, the supreme justification for the death penalty.³³

However, what is perhaps even more bewildering, in Arendt's account, is that the court seemed to believe that Eichmann could be assumed to be a

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 272

³² *ibid.*, p. 209

³³ *ibid.*, p. 277

‘reasonable individual.’ That is, while the court could never presume his innocence, it still assumed that Eichmann, “...like all ‘normal persons,’ must have been aware of the criminal nature of his acts.”³⁴ And in this, the court betrays its lack of conscience, for, of course, Eichmann has been perverted by his Nazism. As we saw earlier, Eichmann cannot see anything ‘criminal’ in his acts. Yet this is what the court demands of him. As much as vengeance plays a role in the trial, so too does a demand for some sort of repentance: “What we have demanded in these trials, where defendants had committed ‘legal’ crimes, is that human beings be capable of telling right from wrong...”³⁵ And this, of course, is something Eichmann cannot do.

Arendt thus seems to be suggesting an impasse, for neither Eichmann nor the court was able to bring itself to a conscience that would imply responsibility. As Arendt notes, “...guilt implies the consciousness of guilt, and punishment evidence that the criminal is a responsible person.”³⁶ However, Eichmann never admitted to guilt, and the Jerusalem court punished him in vengeance, rather than on the basis of factual criminal acts. And this seems to be Arendt’s reasoning as to why the trial was such a failure, but a particular failure for the court, for the court had the opportunity to set a new precedent, and it failed in its responsibility: “...if a crime unknown before, such as genocide, suddenly makes its appearance, justice itself demands a judgment according to a new law...”³⁷

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 26

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 295

³⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” *op. cit.*, pp. 126-7

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. *op. cit.*, p. 254

The court had allowed itself to be swayed by subjective and emotive reasoning, rather than engage in an act of the creative new.

Toward a 'public conscience'

As I have argued thus far in this chapter, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is the book in which Arendt finally makes the move to map her insights on the condition of the individual in modernity onto an explicitly political enterprise. For, at least in her perspective, there is good reason to be suspicious of conscience: misanthropy and self-interest, privileging of emotion over reason, and the belief that the world can take care of itself all emerge from a misguided appropriation of conscience. Indeed, as we have seen in this chapter, 'conscience' seems to have landed in the dustbin of history. For what Arendt sees is conscience, not as that which justifies political activity, but rather as an obfuscation of freedom. Indeed, as Halberstram claims, for Arendt the equation of conscience to individual sovereignty and to free will suggests an "...otherworldly freedom that cannot be the basis for political action..."³⁸

And in this, we perhaps hear a faint echo of Arendt's Augustinian project, in which she rejects recourse to a transcendental moment of reflection. However, we now find a substantive and refined meaning for this rejection: the problem is that conscience, ambiguously structured, is linked with a

³⁸ Michael Halberstram, "Hannah Arendt on the Totalitarian Sublime and its Promise of Freedom" in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*. Steve E. Aschheim (ed.),. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2001 p. 118

personalization of freedom that potentially removes us from the world at large.

As a *personal* possession, acts emerging from a claim of freedom can no longer be scrutinized, and become more like mere opinion than a conduit to political activity. As she writes in *Civil Disobedience*, "...the rules of conscience hinge on interest in the self. They say: Beware of doing something that you will not be able to live with...What I cannot live with may not bother another man's conscience. The result is that conscience will stand against conscience."³⁹

Thus, conscience falls to the logic of majoritarianism, where conscience is no longer expressing *freedom* but rather social mores, in what seems rather akin to Sartre's 'bad faith':

In the market place, the fate of conscience is not much different from the fate of the philosopher's truth: it becomes an opinion, indistinguishable from other opinions. And the strength of opinion does not depend on conscience, but on the number of those with whom it is associated —"unanimous agreement that 'X' is an evil...adds credence to the belief that 'X' is an evil."⁴⁰

This is a very difficult position to proceed from if one wishes to advance a *political* project of the sort Arendt advocates. Undoubtedly, Canovan is correct when she states "...Hannah Arendt constantly deplores the apparent loss of the capacity to act in modern times, and stresses that modern men no longer act, but only participate in processes and behave in a conformist manner."⁴¹ However, then we perhaps have to "...translate her political concept of action into metaphysical concept,"⁴² and this seems antithetical to the Arendtian project. Arendt is always

³⁹ Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience", op. cit., p. 64

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 68

⁴¹ Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1974 p. 109

⁴² Agnes Heller "Hannah Arendt on Tradition and New Beginnings," in Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem, Steve E. Aschheim (ed.) Berkeley: University of California Press. 2001 p. 24

very clear: action is a concrete phenomenon, perhaps the only concreteness to which we can cling at the end of the day.

I think the situation here is much simpler: Arendt's existentialist accounting of the person simply does not correspond to what she wants to achieve in the public realm. And it is for this reason that Pitkin can observe that

The role of individuality in all of this is very confusing, and Arendt does nothing to sort it out. Individual separateness seems to cause totalitarianism, to be caused by it, and yet also to be the best defense against it. The processes that lead to totalitarianism are launched by the competitive individualism of the bourgeoisie and the anxious self-concern of the parvenu trying to get by as an exception.⁴³

Part of this confusion, as I shall return to in Chapter Seven, is because Arendt filters her political thought backward through totalitarianism. And in this, we can perhaps have some sympathy for why she sees conscience as 'failed.' But there is more here that we must pay attention to, for Arendt does try to resuscitate conscience via a *public conscience*⁴⁴ as opposed to a personal conscience. Generating a public conscience does seem to line up with her idea of 'care for the world,' but, to reiterate Canovan, Arendt's individual has a very uncertain position. This is, I think, a result of Arendt thinking of the individual from that point that can be traced back to her dissertation, that the neighbor—the person—is something perfectible, and, in accordance with this, Arendt expects us to behave *as if* we were indeed perfectible beings. Acting from the position of a personal conscience in the public realm is the insertion of *cupiditas* into a realm

⁴³ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 1998 p. 92

⁴⁴ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*. op. cit., p. 194

that must be ruled by *caritas*. And, although Arendt's position here may be considered consistent, it is one that is politically devastating.

Chapter Five

On Revolution: The Fragility of Rights

Rights for Arendt are part of this man-made, artificial world. We thus have a responsibility to care for and maintain political rights. However, what Arendt considers an ‘appropriate’ right for our care is clouded by her concern with ‘the social’: when the social creeps into the field of concern, political rights are destabilized. The introduction of this idea of ‘the social’ raises some very serious concerns about exactly what Arendt will accept as ‘political,’ as well as regarding those whom she will accept as political actors. Because of this concern with the social, she will make a distinction between the ‘good man’ and the ‘good citizen’—an echo of her Augustinian neighbor. She will limit the political to the abstracted concerns of the citizen, and, for her, it is only when we can overcome the messiness of everyday interests that we might be able to be appropriately engaged. Much as she articulated a purified neighbor of futurity in *Love and Saint Augustine*, in *On Revolution* she reasons that we must sacrifice ‘man’ to ‘citizen.’

The larger story of *On Revolution* thus becomes one of how rights may become polluted by misguided sentiment; of how rights must be brought under the care of political community. As human artifice, rights have only we, ourselves as a bulwark against their pollution. There is no higher power, neither God nor

nature, on which we can call to act as protector. But this opens up rights—as embedded and practiced within our political institutions—to contestation.

Through our actions, we confirm our rights and contest their limits. While *On Revolution* may have some rather confused historical discussion, this does not affect the purpose of her *political* argument.¹

Arendt wants us to recognize that political rights are the property of the people. As our property, we are entitled to their use; in our use of our rights, we might be able to construct a world that is ‘habitable.’ Now, this is certainly not a new insight: we may consider the entirety of political thought since the ancients as having to do with ‘rights’ in one form or another. However, what makes the difference in Arendt’s work here is that she casts rights as something inherently fragile, as precious goods that cannot be taken for granted. Rights are artifice, man-made, and hence, cannot be considered eternal: just as we can construct political rights, so too can they be demolished. In our modern condition, we have forgotten that rights are artifice, Arendt warns, and we need to reassert an active care for our rights; they must be protected and nurtured through use.

When Arendt makes this distinction of citizen *contra* man, she displaces the boundaries of explicitly *political* life from that of the existential. Arendt hopes to establish rights as not simply political tools, but as having an existential impact. That is, how rights are constituted and configured, their philosophic

¹ I should note that I have no intent in dealing with the historical accuracy of her critique of the course of the revolutionary movements she examines. While I will note that she does seem to make some rather glaring oversights in her analysis, to engage my discussion on such critiques would take us far afield from the task at hand. Perhaps what we lose here in terms of historical accuracy, we gain in insight into practical issues of the linkage between rights, dissent, and the maintenance of political space. I shall take her interpretation for what it is, and leave these questions of interpretative accuracy aside.

intent, has a direct effect upon access to and the use of power in a given society; they have a concrete effect on how we constitute both our Selves and our Community. When she writes: "... political freedom, generally speaking, means the right 'to be a participator in government', or it means nothing,"² she speaks to this existential quality she wants to move from privacy to publicity. However, as foreshadowed by her configuring of the neighbor in *Love and St. Augustine*, she has removed too much from her category of 'citizen.' *On Revolution* is her attack on the modern preoccupation with 'authenticity'; it is her defense against the loss of a world 'totally explained.' It is a plea that we reconsider the 'treasure' of the Self modernity believes it has found, and to look elsewhere to locate the treasure of the World. That is, she asks us to reconfigure what it means to Exist. It is an attempt to demonstrate that "...Existence can develop only in the shared life of human beings inhabiting a given world common to them all."³

Arendt's aim is to found a communal existential moment as a means of speaking to and containing the angst of modernity: her attacks on equality, on emotion in politics, are an attempt to mitigate and control the Self that has been unleashed into the world. She wants us, then, to claim an existential moment in citizenship so that men might act in such a way that the "[r]ecognition of rights is a tribute to the human essence."⁴

² Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London and New York: Penguin Books. 1963 p. 218

³ Hannah Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy?" (1946) in Jerome Kohn, ed., *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, New York: Schocken Books. 1994 p. 186

⁴ George Kateb, "Existential Values in Arendt's Treatment of Evil and Morality," *Social Research* Vol 74: No 3 : Fall 2007 811-854 p. 825

What we must consider here is whether Arendt's configuration actually makes sense. The problem, as identified by Lewis and Sandra Hinchman, is that she wants to attach existentialism to the polis,⁵ and because of this, "...her arguments about the connection between socio-economic issues and politics are ambiguous, capable of supporting shifting, even contradictory, interpretations."⁶ What I want to suggest here is that these 'shifting, contradictory interpretations' are less the result of grafting what seem to be opposing paradigms to one another, but rather, that in her attempts to develop a 'communal existential' she removes too much of what makes one an individual. Her citizen, in shedding that which makes him a 'man,' is far too idealized. Thus, it seems that her purpose—for us to recognize the fullness of Being in the company of Others—becomes unrealizable.

The political and the existential

Regardless of Arendt's intellectual pedigree, that Arendt would seek an existential resolution to the modern condition is not a surprising one. For, as we have established, Arendt does very much read the modern condition as one of both existential lack and existential excess: as a world, we have failed in managing the existential force that has been unleashed upon us. The tragedy of the modern is one of continual failure to apprehend the existential and contain it

⁵ Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, "Existentialism Politicized: Arendt's Debt to Jaspers" in Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds. *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. 1994 p. 163

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 160

appropriately. On the one hand, we have Rahel Varnhagen, turning romantically inward; on the other, we have totalitarianism, attempting to deny any moment of existential freedom. How to both recognize and mitigate the excesses of existentialism thus becomes her defining *political* task, but it is a task Arendt believes we are perhaps barely capable of for we have become transfixed by consideration of 'the social.' The social, as "...an amorphous, anonymous, uniformizing reality...a form of glorified national housekeeping in economic and pecuniary matters, displaces the concern with the political, with the *res publica*, from the hearts and minds of men."⁷ The imperative then is to find a way for the hearts and minds of men to become re-enamored with the *res publica*. And in this, Arendt's diagnosis is undoubtedly correct, for this glamorous, ever-fascinating spectacle of the Self is indeed a perturbing challenge to the public realm. As we saw with *Rahel*, it is far too easy to see the Self as meaningful, that it is far too easy to shun society, claiming that it is society, not that Self, that is a hindrance to Reason.

And it is in this that we could argue that Arendt faces an insurmountable challenge, for this Self is indeed a powerful and *necessary* component of not only what we call modernity, but the Enlightenment itself. It is highly doubtful that any politically compelling argument could be made to disregard the Self.

Conscience, but specifically propertied and differentiated individual conscience is, after all, the axiomatic foundation of Enlightenment values. It is the stance of Schelling, which Arendt also identifies with Kant: "Nothing universal exists at all,

⁷ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. 1996 p. 23

only the individual, and the *universal being* exists only if it is the *absolute individual*.”⁸ However, this individual, this Self, is at a loss, for the Enlightenment promise of man’s freedom, is countered by “...the objective sphere, which is the sphere of causality, and loses its element of freedom. Man, who is free in himself, is nonetheless hopelessly at the mercy of the workings of a natural world alien to him, of a fate opposing him and destroying his freedom.”⁹

Thus, the fate of the modern individual is to be consistently and constantly pressed up against this reality over which he seems to have no control. Politically speaking, it is easy to see how we could come to the abject rejection of the world: it seemingly contradicts and confines the Self at every step, and hence, better to push it aside than to bear the psychological burden of Self-oblivion. But here is where Arendt enters sideways into the issue, revealing both her humanism and commitment to Enlightenment values. Because, for her, the Self is something distinct from the ‘human,’ and it is humans, not Selves, to whom the world belongs. Her critique of the modern is that of “[t]he Self in the form of conscience has taken the place of humanity, and being-a-Self has taken the place of being human;”¹⁰ the quest thus becomes how to resuscitate that sense of being human in the world.

She will hang her existentialism on a *public* premise. To care for the world, to make the world fit for human habitation, means for us to realize that

⁸ quoted in Hannah Arendt, “What is Existential Philosophy?” op. cit., pp. 169

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 171

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 181

one's own individual Self-freedom is, following Jaspers, dependent upon the company of others:

For Jaspers, existence is not a form of Being but a form of human freedom, the form in which "man as potential spontaneity rejects the conception of himself as mere result." Existence is not man's being as such and as a given; rather, "man is, in *Dasein*, possible existence." The word "existence" here means that man achieves reality only to the extent that he acts out of his own freedom rooted in spontaneity and "connects through communication with the freedom of others."¹¹

And thus, existence for Arendt enters into the political, for to encounter the Self becomes a choice rooted in one's own freedom: one cannot attempt, as Rahel Varnhagen did, to learn of the Self in an isolated and fatalistic manner. Existence is not something natural, but rather, like our world, is artifice. The task then is to create "...the condition that makes it possible for existence, encountering the 'weight of reality,' to find its way into reality and to belong to it in the only way in which human beings can belong to it, namely, by choosing it."¹² Politics is the mode by which living existentially in the world becomes possible, for it is politics that demands we make choices about this human world we create. We are, then, to

...redirect our attention away from Society, that self-moving cosmos of which we are presumed to be parts, to Politics: that is, to the public actions and interactions of particular individual men, and the events which they bring about...To Hannah Arendt, politics is the realm of freedom, and the defence of politics against sociologism is a defence of human freedom and dignity against determinism and abject submission to fate.¹³

Political life—public life—is therefore absolutely necessary to the development of the Self. Moreover, assuring that the world remains fit for us all forbids us to

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 183

¹² *ibid.*, p. 185

¹³ Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1974 p. 2

reject the importance of existential life. It is not the 'natural' world that necessarily confronts our freedom, but rather the structures that we have imposed upon the world that confront our freedom. As artifice, these structures are necessarily the results of choices; as choices, they belong to that existential category in which they can be subject to our further choices. That is, we are free to make the decisions that govern us: we are not 'helpless' in the face of reality. Rather, Arendt wants us to recognize that we may "...[fight] against illusions of helplessness, the spurious naturalization of matters that are in fact subject to human choice and action."¹⁴

Two revolutions

Since this is Hannah Arendt, what we work with here is not a political history of revolution, but rather, a political phenomenology of revolution. Thus, in very Arendtian fashion, her observations are more about the lasting effects of the revolutionary moment on communities than about the tactics of revolution. Both the French and American revolutions share in common an act of founding, of creating a new political order, and Arendt's focus is on the *choices* made by actors within their respective communities, leading us to consider the qualitative differences of these two revolutions.

In her judgment, Arendt does not quibble: "...the French Revolution, which ended in disaster, has made world history, while the American Revolution, so

¹⁴ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 1998. p. 192

triumphantly successful, has remained an event of little more than local importance.”¹⁵ This is, undoubtedly, a contentious statement, but it is one that Arendt grounds in a phenomenological interpretation. While all revolutions aim, in her account, to bring about a change in the structures of government, and not simply a replacement of one power with another, what comes about with these modern revolutions is a combination of a new beginning *and* of freedom.¹⁶ While these two revolutions may indeed be the markers that usher in the historical moment of political modernity, for Arendt each represents an opposing force of our modern condition: on the one side, we have the ‘public happiness’ of the American model while on the other, we have the ‘private happiness’ of the French. Revolution thus contains an idealized futurity.

What distinguishes Arendt’s account of revolution from others is the thread of existentialism she uses to judge the idealized futurity embedded within these revolutions: existential fulfillment becomes the lens through which she distinguishes the American from the French Revolution. That is, her interpretation rests on their comparative effectiveness in generating a milieu in which the possibility of an ‘existential miracle’ is protected. George Kateb describes the Arendtian ‘existential miracle’ as that which “...occurs when people rise up against unfreedom, and in their insurgency, practice, if only for a time, authentic politics, with as little violence as possible.”¹⁷ The most significant point of difference is in what she terms the ‘social’, a space that exists between private

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, op. cit., p. 56.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁷ George Kateb, “Existential Values in Arendt’s Treatment of Evil and Morality,” op. cit., p. 850

life and public life, in which “[w]hat matters here is not personal distinction but the differences by which people belong to certain groups whose very identifiability demands they discriminate against other groups in the same domain.”¹⁸ Or, as characterized by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, for Arendt the social is rather like “...an evil monster from outer space, entirely external to and separate from us...intent on debilitating, absorbing, and ultimately destroying us, gobbling up our distinct individuality and turning us into robots that mechanically serve its purposes.”¹⁹ Arendt’s discussion of revolution is thus one of the pollution of the political by the social: the entry of the social into politics denies existential fulfillment.

Perhaps counterintuitively, Arendt argues that concern for the social diminishes our ability to engage politically in that it redirects attention from the explicitly *political*. The ‘social’ is a mischief introduced by compassion for the poor,²⁰ that transforms “...the Rights of Man into the rights of Sans-Culottes...”²¹ The distinction in the revolutionaries’ aims is thus that

The American version actually proclaims no more than the necessity of civilized government for all mankind; the French version, however, proclaims the existence of rights independent of and outside the body politic, and then goes on to equate these so-called rights, namely the rights of man *qua* man, with the rights of citizens.²²

And from this distinction, she will explicate that this concern for the social, as exemplified by the French, ushers in a concern for morality that demands we be good men rather than good citizens. Not content with new institutional

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken Books. 1983. p. 205

¹⁹ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, op. cit., p. 4

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” in *Men in Dark Times*. San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1968, p. 14

²¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, op. cit., p. 61

²² *ibid.*, p. 149

beginnings as the Americans were, the French will attempt to pursue not just public happiness but private happiness. For Arendt, then, the French Revolution is thus a case of revolutionizing man himself, and this attempt at ‘purification,’ as a remedy for social ills, is precisely what Arendt finds so horrifying with regard to the French Revolution. To engage in the ‘rights of Sans-Culottes’ is to engage in an ideal version of man, a version, lifted, so to speak, out of the context of artifice.

But let us be clear here: when Arendt speaks of the ‘social,’ she is speaking about *poverty*. In Arendt’s account it comes down to a simple fundamental distinction: the American founders did not need to deal with the problem of *poverty*, or more specifically, “misery and want.”²³ “Poverty,” she writes,

...is more than deprivation, it is a state of constant want and acute misery whose ignominy consists in its dehumanizing force; poverty is abject because it puts men under the absolute dictate of their bodies, that is, under the absolute dictate of necessity as all men know it from their most intimate experience and outside all speculation.²⁴

It is the wretchedness of the poor, with all their concerns for the mundane that derails the French Revolution. For, in Arendt’s accounting, when we attempt to integrate the concerns of the poor into the artifice we call ‘politics,’ all that will ensue is but a concern for private life. Poverty enforces the concerns of *cupiditas*:

The hidden wish of poor men is not ‘To each according to his needs,’ but ‘To each according to his desires.’ And while it is true

²³ *ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 60

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.²⁵

Of course, the dismay of allowing the poor to enter political life has a long and lingering history. What does seem to bring something new to this dismay is Arendt's linkage of this to existential concerns. Here, in her assessment of poverty and the social question, she makes the case for existential fulfillment being something that must *necessarily* be played out in the public realm. What one is as a private individual is inconsequential. What *is* consequential is individuation within the realm of publicity. How *I* present myself to the world and interact with others is how I can ensure some sort of psychological fulfillment in the modern world. It is what she terms 'public happiness':

...“public happiness,” which means that when man takes part in public life he opens up for himself a dimension of human experience that otherwise remains closed to him and that in some way constitutes a part of complete “happiness.”²⁶

But, according to Arendt, this sort of existential fulfillment is all but impossible if we politically engage—that is, attempt to address via public institutions—the problem of poverty. For she poses the condition of poverty not as simply one of material want, nor even of the necessity of the body, but rather as a *psychological* condition:

...the predicament of the poor after their self-preservation is assured is that their lives are without consequence, and that they remain excluded from the light of the public realm where excellence can shine; they stand in darkness wherever they go.²⁷

²⁵ *ibid.*, p 139.

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution: A Commentary,” in *Crises of the Republic*. New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1972 p. 203

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, op. cit., p. 69

And here, Arendt recalls Aristotle, claiming that the poor bring the cares of the household into the political, a sphere to which such cares are not germane. Indeed, as Arendt sees it, such cares are not only best solved as “matters of administration,”²⁸ but even more sinisterly, “...every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads into terror...”²⁹ Moreover, “...the uprising of the poor against the rich carries with it an altogether different and much greater momentum of force than the rebellion of the oppressed against their oppressors.”³⁰ And thus, for Arendt, when the social enters, revolution loses its explicit political content, succumbing instead to the desire of *cupiditas*, that is, the desiring realm of ‘private happiness’ Hence, the

...role of revolution was no longer to liberate men from the oppression of fellow men, let alone to found freedom, but to liberate the life process of society from the fetters of scarcity so that it could swell into a stream of abundance.³¹

Is it any wonder, then, that Sheldon Wolin claims that there is “...an antidemocratic strain in Arendt’s thought...”?³² For Arendt’s perspective on the poor does indeed seem to be very elitist and paternalistic, apparently precluding that the poor have the capacity to *think*, or to have a conscience.

But this does seem odd, given Arendt’s status within political thought as a resolute supporter of political freedom and citizen activity. And indeed, many have attempted to rescue Arendt from what seems to be an inherently elitist position. As Hanna Fenichel Pitkin observes, we must consider that

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 91

²⁹ *ibid.*, p 112

³⁰ *idem.*

³¹ *ibid.*, p 64

³² Sheldon S. Wolin, “Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political” in Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds. *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, op. cit., p. 290

Perhaps, then, it is not a particular subject-matter, nor a particular class of people, but a particular attitude against which the public realm must be guarded – Aristotle might say an inappropriate “spirit of intercourse.” Perhaps a “laborer” is to be identified not by his manner of producing nor by his poverty but by his “process”-oriented outlook; perhaps he is “driven by necessity” not objectively, but because he *regards* himself as driven, incapable of action.³³

And while it is undoubtedly the case that Arendt is most definitely speaking about “...*attitudinal* rather than to *content-specific* orientations,”³⁴ Benhabib is also quite correct in asking, despite this, “...how realistic is this quasi-aristocratic separation of bread and politics? How far beyond well-being and self-interest can any understanding of politics in the modern world settle itself?”³⁵

But on the question of the linkage of economics and politics, Arendt is surprisingly mute. One does not need to be a Marxist to see that the political and the economic have always been in close association with one another. Arendt’s strategy, instead, is to simply relegate economic concerns to this domain of the social, insulating it from political critique and questioning. And here we come to something quite interesting, for her reasoning suggests not elitism, nor even this anti-democratic strand, but rather, a deep concern for the existential quality of politics as a thing-in-itself, and has a very strong Augustinian shading. For what she suggests in her excision of the economic is that so long as economic questions remain present, the demands of private interest will enter the fray. We must, for Arendt, consider the public realm of politics as something separate and

³³ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Private and Public” *ibid.*, p. 276

³⁴ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, *op. cit.*, p. 140

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 140

distinct from any sort of plurality of interests. Rather, as Margaret Canovan as so nicely analogized:

Politics [for Arendt], in other words, is not ‘for People,’...the point of politics is not to further the private interests of citizens any more than the point of Oxford is to look after the private welfare of members of the university: instead, it has its own public concerns.³⁶

The point then, is that Arendt sees the public realm as something ‘beyond,’ rather akin to the Heavenly City of Augustine; of course, our job then is to approximate the purity of this here on Earth. However, in recalling Augustine, we must remember that her reading turned on her construction of an abstracted and purified neighbor. This is why her device of the social becomes so crucial here, for in this social, she can deposit all those traits of humanity that threaten the purity of her sacred political realm.

Equality and ‘existential miracle’

To be concerned with the social—with the condition of the *malheureux*—is to necessarily be concerned with the question of equality. And it is that equality, or more precisely, that *social* equality becomes a *public* concern that worries Arendt. But we must tread carefully here: Arendt is no reactionary. Perhaps surprisingly, given her comments about poverty, this is not an argument that turns on whether the poor lack the ‘nobility’ to enter public discourse. Rather, this a much more subtle and disciplined stance. It is a stance that sees equality as opening the

³⁶ Margaret Canovan, “Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm” in Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds. *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, op. cit., p. 187

public realm to ‘sociologism’ rather than to politics. And once sociologism enters, we then unleash “....determinism and abject submission to fate.”³⁷ The moment of existential miracle is lost.

But how peculiar! For is not this idea of equality—the idea that each and every person have an equal dignity of conscience—one of the pillars of Western political thought? One of those strong sturdy pillars that generates critique and progress? And here is where Arendt reveals her latent criticism against such talk, for:

...the principle of equality is not omnipotent; it cannot equalize natural, physical characteristics. This limit is reached only when inequalities of economic and educational conditions have been ironed out—but—the more equal people have become in every respect, and the more equality permeates the whole textures of society, the more will differences be resented, the more conspicuous will those become who are visibly and by nature unlike others.³⁸

Thus her existential—but not necessarily political critique—of equality emerges. She disparages the pretence of equality to erase difference, but it is not solely because there is an obvious limit to which such difference can be erased. Far more important to Arendt’s position is the way equality, or at least this social equality as a political premise, has a way of blurring distinctions between that which is properly public and that which is properly private. Equality, when a goal of political practice, allows concerns of private interest to guide and delineate public debate. That is, we think as householders—about the small issues of everyday—rather than as republicans—concerned with the larger entity of the

³⁷ Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, op. cit., p. 2

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” op. cit., p. 200

world. Concern for equality pushes us toward thinking about banalities, and hence, banalities come to dominate public discourse.

But there is another aspect to Arendt's wish to dismiss equality as a political goal. And this aspect of her critique is, I believe far more detrimental to Arendt's project. This is her critique of what I will term 'associational equality.' And in this, she appears to suggest that the problem is not just that privacy—the concerns of the household—will enter the public sphere, but that there is a very dangerous crossing of the public notion of equality into the private sphere. That is, Arendt argues that the concern for the social raises not just a concern for 'banalities' in public life, but that the social demands that we *politically* demand 'good men' and not just 'good citizens.' The 'social' requires attention to equality in *private* life, not just in public.

Arendt's stance of equality becoming a mode for manipulating private life is perhaps best expressed in her essay "Reflections on Little Rock," in which she tackles the implications of school desegregation. Here, she argues that the government has missed the point, that

The real issue is equality before the law of the country, and equality is violated by segregation laws, that is, by laws enforcing segregation, not by social customs and the manners of educating children. If it were only a matter of equally good education for my children, an effort to grant them equality of opportunity, why was I not asked to fight for an improvement of schools for Negro children...?³⁹

So, once again, Arendt seems to be making what seems a reactionary argument, for is this not simply suggesting 'separate but equal'? But, once again, we must tread carefully in interpreting Arendt's intent, for this is neither an argument for

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 194

'separate spheres' nor for some form of identity politics. No, this is something we must consider through the lens of Arendt's earnest humanism, for she also writes: "...I would deny that the government had any right to tell me in whose company my child received its instruction. The rights of parents to decide such matters for their children until they are grown-ups are challenged only by dictatorships."⁴⁰ Her position can thus be summed up as being that of "...the question not how to eliminate discrimination, but how to keep it confined to the social sphere."⁴¹ And this, for her, is the fundamental distinction: we can *never* eliminate discrimination; it is antithetical to our very humanness; it is because of the varieties of humanness that civilization must be considered artifice and why we must consider this civilization as inherently fragile. As Canovan has noted,

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 civilization is and must be built in defiance of nature. What it does imply, however, is that, like the rest of civilization, equality does not come easily and has costs.⁴²

Undoubtedly, Arendt has reason to be suspicious of this sort of social equality, and there is a logic to her argument. Arendt wants us to consider the urgency with which she senses that social equality leads to conformity, and that "...freedom depends on the segregation of the public and the social, because when social problems enter the public realm, there is nothing to say and no way to act."⁴³

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 195

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 206

⁴² Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992, p. 242

⁴³ Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, p. 58

But here we must confront the ‘brass tacks’ of her position. What effect does *not* having social equality have on the citizen? What effect does knowing *I must be escorted to school under armed guard for I am so hated* have on the ability of a person to enter the public realm, and enjoy that public happiness that Arendt so wants us to experience? But her politics rests entirely upon us embracing this public realm, to be satisfied with public happiness. Her political person is not an individual, but a *persona*, which is all well-and-good considering her argument to artifice, but does this, echoing Kateb, make any sense when considering her existential thread?

Existence and authenticity

What we must recall here is that Arendt is intent on dislodging the primacy of the heroic Self as taken up by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Obviously, the Self, as a Being of conscience, can never be returned to its bottle. To constrain the Self only leads to superfluity. But what *can* be attacked is the Self’s preoccupation with authenticity, with the idea that authenticity was the ‘treasure’ modernity brings to the world:

The treasure, he thought, was that he had ‘*found* himself’, that he no longer suspected himself of ‘insincerity’, that he needed no mask and no make-believe to appear, that wherever he went he appeared as he was to others and to himself, that he could afford ‘to go naked’. These reflections are significant enough as they testify to the involuntary self-discourse, to the joys of appearing in word and deed without equivocation and without self-reflection that are inherent in action.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 280-281

Arendt thus suggests two fatal blows for political life, for 'to go naked' into politics requires a permanent fascination with the 'spectacle of inner life,' and this necessitates injecting the irrationality of emotion into the public sphere. This we are acquainted with, through Rahel. The spectacle of inner life is one of privacy and misanthropy. The second blow is that politics no longer rests on the adoption of a mask—a persona—that one exhibits publicly. Rather, one must continually express oneself as complete and whole. The danger here, when we drop the pretence of the persona, and only accept the Self in public life, is that we then expose the individual to a moral inspection. No longer is being a 'good citizen' sufficient. Rather, one must become a 'good man,' the one who acts from a "purity of motive."⁴⁵ Indeed, the result of such a concern with being an authentic Self is, for Arendt, the antithesis of the 'human': "[t]he Self in the form of conscience has taken the place of humanity, and being-a-Self has taken the place of being human."⁴⁶ What occurs with this shift that Arendt finds most alarming is that when rights are no longer founded upon the *citizen*, so too goes a loss of the *persona*, or "the legal personality which is given and guaranteed by the body politic."⁴⁷ That is, we lose the ability to see humanity in its guise of 'artifice,' accepting that institutions, rules, rights, are contractual agreements. We become more interested in "...looking at a political issue from a private point of view, asking 'what does my conscience demand of me,' " rather than of "...looking

⁴⁵ Gareth Williams, "Love and Responsibility: A Political Ethic for Hannah Arendt" *Political Studies* (1998): 945

⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy?" in Jerome Kohn, ed., *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, op. cit., p. 181

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, op. cit. p. 108.

at it from a public point of view saying ‘what will become of the polity, and what action must I take to promote the public good?’ “⁴⁸

But asking ‘what does my conscience demand of me?’ assumes being finely attuned to one’s conscience. That is, to know one’s conscience is to be consumed with the ‘spectacle of inner life.’ And what Arendt profoundly points to here is the existential crisis of the modern: freedom, that fundamental political liberty has become privatized. *Freedom* takes on the coloration of *individual* freedom, as something that exists outside of, and separate from, the political realm. It has

...shifted places; it resides no longer in the public realm but in the private life of the citizens and so must be defended against the public and its power. Freedom and power have parted company, and the fateful equating of power with violence, of the political with government, and of government with a necessary evil has begun.⁴⁹

What we must consider here is freedom, as Arendt understands it, and how this freedom necessarily entails a discussion of the fragility of rights. For Arendt, freedom is a *public* good that has become confused with private happiness, and with that, a distrust of the public realm itself.

And there is something highly compelling in this message, for this is a critique that counters the loneliness of Kierkegaard *et al.* For what Arendt is trying to convince us of is that we have read the modern condition backwards: it is not ‘society’ that has created this sense of loss. Rather, it is the demand for individuation and a private life that has generated our sense of superfluousness

⁴⁸ Margaret Canovan, “Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm” in Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds. *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, op. cit., p. 199

⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, op. cit., p. 137.

in the world. For superfluity generates resentment, and in this resentment, we refuse to look past our Self and our private sphere. But to live with resentment is to choose to live on what Sartre has called a “plane of passion.”⁵⁰ A thread of continuity thus emerges between *Revolution* and *Eichmann*: the inability of those driven by necessity to grasp at anything more than the mundane. To allow the *malheureux* into the public realm, to allow them to shape the public realm, becomes a corruption of care for the world. For in their misery, the poor cannot see ‘the world’ but only their own resentment at the world. According to Arendt, the poor cannot see their public equality, but only their private, social, inequality, and thus become a threat to politics: confusing the realms of the private and the public, the poor demand that public life regularize and bring equality into privacy, a feat that Arendt sees as impossible:

The whole sphere of the merely given, relegated to private life in civilized society, is a permanent threat to the public sphere, because the public sphere is as consistently based on the law of equality as the private sphere is based in the law of universal difference and differentiation. Equality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given us, but is the result of human organization 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.⁵¹

This is, for Arendt, the heart of the modern crisis. For, in translating freedom to something private, we relinquish our public authority. And here is her fear: so long as we are content in our private lives, we will pay little attention to the maintenance of the public realm; without maintaining that public realm,

⁵⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*. New York: Schocken Books. 1948/1995

⁵¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, London and San Diego: Harcourt, Inc. 1968. p. 301

without providing it with care and attention, those civil liberties, upon which those cherished private freedoms rest, are all too easily compromised. Moreover, it becomes increasingly easy to say that chipping away at civil liberties is acceptable, so long as my own private realm remains unaffected. Hence, freedom and politics, much like oil and water, cannot mix: freedom is something to be enjoyed *outside of* the public sphere.

And thus the tragedy of modernity for Arendt is that in demanding authenticity rather than persona, we lose all that politics promises; we renege on assuming responsibility for the artifice of the world. Instead we retreat into the misanthropy of privacy, ironically losing our ability to protect private life in the process. The danger, of course, in the retreat to privacy is that we become misanthropes and thus banal: in privacy we are creatures entirely of our own making, of our own minds. And thus it is the retreat into privacy that Arendt wants to defend against, a privacy that threatens our political rights in the modern age. The curse of private happiness is that it is too closely related to individual tastes to be subject to communal interpretation, and hence, to become a source of political activity. Rather, when politics devolves into the realm of 'private happiness,' it is never able to move beyond individual opinion:

Opinions...never belong to groups but exclusively to individuals, who 'exert their reason coolly and freely', and no multitude, be it the multitude of a part or of the whole society, will ever be capable of forming an opinion...Even though opinions are formed by individuals and must remain, as it were, their property, no single individual...can ever be equal to the task of sifting opinions, of passing them through the sieve of an intelligence which will separate the arbitrary and the merely idiosyncratic, and thus purify them into public views...Since opinions are formed and tested in a process of exchange of opinion against opinion, their differences

can be mediated only by passing them through the medium of a body of men, chosen for the purpose; these men, taken by themselves, are not wise, and yet their common purpose is wisdom—wisdom under the conditions of the fallibility and frailty of the human mind.⁵²

And thus, it is publicness, but particularly what she calls ‘public happiness’ that is Arendt’s remedy to our existential anguish. Not only does public happiness, for her, relieve us of the impulse to retreat into privacy, but becomes our protection against incursions to our freedom. Public happiness demands that we recognize and take responsibility for our freedom, and thus is a distinctly *political* conception for her. And here we must note Arendt’s intent. In claiming public happiness as a priority to private happiness, she is, I believe, attempting to reorganize the plane upon which existential anguish exposes itself. For her purpose is to invoke a communal claim to political freedom: our individual moments of anguish are meaningless. Rather, what is meaningful is anguish as experienced as some sort of collective, whether that be the anguish of being a Jew, or that of a ‘superfluous’ caste: it is the anguish of not being seen as belonging to the world. Thus, rather than using existential anguish as a reason to retreat from the world, Arendt instead asks us to use it to develop a critique, a critique generated from knowing that the world, as shared and cared for by all of us, as the domain in which we all live, must be made fit for our habitation. It is an existentialism of a communal rather than an individual.

The question is whether this is a fit that works—or even makes sense. For, as we move into the public sphere, the realm in which we shall experience a

⁵² Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, op. cit., p. 227

happiness intended to help us overcome the angst of modern life, Arendt has premised her apparatus on that of the 'good citizen.' But the good citizen is, in itself, a rather rarefied and abstract being, for not only is he but a persona, but he is also without the encumbrances of the 'social.' Not only am I left to wonder, with Mary McCarthy, of what exactly we shall discuss in this public sphere, but of what sorts of measure is taken to determine what makes one a 'good citizen' in the eyes of Arendt. Indeed, Pitkin is quite correct in asking : "But then, what *does* she imagine as the *content* of political speech and action? And why is this question so difficult to answer from her text?"⁵³ Of course, there is the simplistic response that one must have a commitment to the general good, of prioritizing the 'care of the world' to the 'care of the self.' But the boundaries between private self-interest and the public good are often fuzzy at the best of times, and it is precisely this boundary that Arendt wants to clarify as we consider her public sphere.

Her public sphere rests on good citizens, however, and these good citizens are very strange creatures indeed. In her demand for a 'good citizen' she demands too much from a person and too little from politics. Politics becomes less about building the structures that will help order and protect individuals than about individuals finding an *existential* value in citizenship. There is perhaps something highly laudatory and innovative in this analysis; the problem, however, is that by demarcating the social so rigidly, this citizen is significantly removed from what may be considered his whole self. If one wants

⁵³ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public" in Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds. Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays, op. cit., p. 271

to inject the existential into the polis, as Kateb argues Arendt is doing, then one needs to accept that there will be a certain messiness of behavior. Arendt herself hitches onto the idea of the unpredictability of people; that we must be ready to allow for that unexpected moment. Yet, she shuts out so much of a person's context, we are left wondering from where this unexpected moment will come. The problem, then, is that politics becomes less about finding ways to deal with the messiness of humans, rather than of demonstrating a public self to the world. She wants us to experience the existential moment in a very narrow field, a field that she deems correct and appropriate for a citizen 'caring for the world.'

Chapter Six

Arendt's Public Sphere: Locating a Political Existential

Arendt's remedy to the 'malaise of modernity' is to attempt to redefine and reinvigorate the 'public sphere.' We have already seen that she draws attention to the need for the Self to exist in public: the public sphere is a type of *therapeia* for the modern age. But, for Arendt, the Self is now a potentially much more tainted Being than for Augustine, insofar that the stakes of engaging *cupiditas* are now much higher: retreat into the realm of privacy is not just a shrugging off of the responsibilities of citizenship, but an invitation to totalitarianism. However, the promise of freedom distinctly rests upon the unbounded creativity of the Self: the Self that has been thrown into the world cannot be pushed aside. And therein hinges the difficulty: how to restrain the 'dangerous' aspects of the Self whilst cultivating and encouraging those aspects of the Self that will make the world 'fit for human habitation'? Her device of the public sphere is one that articulates that fulfillment of the Self can *only* occur within the public sphere. Arendt's public sphere is a device that aims to ensure the future of the world by meeting the existential needs of the Self.

Arendt's public sphere is not one in which men arrive, having developed their excellence in the private realm, ready to engage with other, similarly

prepared excellent others, but rather, it is within the public sphere itself where men find and develop their excellence. For the device of the public sphere is to make the world ‘fit for human habitation’, where “[t]o be at home in the world is for people to be free, to be responsible politically for the cultural totality”¹: it is where we develop our ‘common love’ of the world. Her public sphere requires us to engage the Augustinian *quaestio* and push beyond banality.

However, Arendt perhaps tries to do too much with this device of the public sphere. Her public sphere, via the development of a standard of ‘citizenship,’ rests upon articulating a defense against the totalizing and Self-erasing. But this reduces politics to a psychological moment. And in this psychological moment, she demands a pristine citizen, in which the citizen—the abstracted neighbor—has very little connection to his situatedness in the world. That is, Arendt’s citizen in the public sphere is more concerned with displaying himself as a ‘good citizen’ than with making concrete political demands.

The specter of totalitarianism

Arendt’s *political* emphasis on interpersonal behavior comes from her observations of totalitarianism.

It was, then, the totalitarian attempt to destroy human plurality and spontaneity in the camps—the *fact* of Auschwitz—that propelled Arendt to undertake her investigations in political theory. Again and again, these investigations circle back to the idea of the public realm as an

¹ George Kateb, Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld. 1983. p. 173

institutionally articulated space between individuals; to political action conceived as spontaneous and joint action undertaken to either found or preserve such a constitutional space; and to the phenomenon of human plurality as the basic constitutive element of the political world as such.²

Totalitarianism for Arendt, as we recall, comes about due to a sense of loneliness, of feeling superfluous in the world, and the primary present danger is that modernity makes it far too easy to turn inward. Her public sphere, then, must be interpreted by the challenge posed by a world in which people “...realized that their lives and the lives of their families depended not upon their fellow-citizens but exclusively on the whims of the government which they faced in complete loneliness without any help whatsoever from the group to which they happened to belong.”³

And this, undoubtedly, is the reason why Arendt focuses less on the interaction between people and institutions than on the interactions between individual persons. In these interactions between persons, Arendt hopes that we will recognize what is perhaps most significant, that political life is less about achieving some endpoint, but rather, is a qualitative expression of life itself. As Benhabib comments,

...we can conclude that the “political” for Arendt need not define a given and predetermined set of issues, nor refer only to certain specific institutions. Rather, what constitutes the political is a certain quality of the life of speech and action, of talking and acting in common with others who are one’s equals. This quality is characterized by the willingness to give reasons in public, to entertain others’ points of view and interests, even when they contradict one’s own, and attempt to transform the dictates of self-interest into a common public goal.⁴

² Dana Villa, *Public Freedom*. Princeton : Princeton University Press. 2008 p. 309

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, London and San Diego: Harcourt, Inc. 1968. p. 320

⁴ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. 1996 p. 146

Arendt's public sphere then, through its existential articulation, intends to appeal on precisely those points which created the dissatisfaction and misanthropy raised by the modern: the public sphere is an attempt to reclaim individual human relevance in the world. It is a way of mitigating the hurdles presented by the modern: the public sphere actively calls us to 'become a question unto ourselves.' And it is this ability to raise the Augustinian *quaestio* that Arendt fears may very well be soon lost.

As we have seen in earlier chapters, it is insufficient to raise self-questioning in isolation. Our very humanity rests on recognizing that the world is a place of collectivity. Hence, "...the public realm saves the world from being permanently 'dimmed-down','⁵ where we are expected to overcome our mundane, and perhaps even petty, concerns in the pursuit of an abstract view of human freedom and excellence. Rather, for Arendt, acting in public is a method generating a *communal* stake in the world, wherein the Self's *Existenz* is organically related to the *Existenz* of the World.

Should we lose sight of the very idea of humanity, should we "...[pretend] not to be human, that is, not to be plural and free: [we then] side with inhuman forces, make [our]selves and others into members of an animal species, submerge [our] capacity for thought in the relentless automatism of single-track logic;"⁶ this is the true terror of modernity. Thus her ultimate concern is to protect that beautiful human uniqueness that 'illuminates the darkness,' which is one and

⁵ Dana Villa, Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political, Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press. 1996 p. 11

⁶ Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 62

the same with that which prevents our sinking into species-dom. We must “...face up to and accept the implication of [our] humanity, which means accepting [our] plurality, [our] freedom to act and to think, and [our] joint responsibility to establish a world between [us], to set limits to the forces of nature and to bestow rights upon one another,”⁷ rather than retreat into misanthropy.

Care for the World

For Arendt, the *ne plus ultra* of politics is the small, face-to-face discussion of the New England town meeting, council movements, the Athenian agora. Arendt favors the small collective, where members are full entities in the sense that they know and are known by others; that they are compelled to function as a component of a group; that each member's acts are directly answerable and questionable. Responsibility, in other words, cannot be ignored. Innocence cannot be invoked. Decisions are not made remotely, nor are they something from which one can abstain. With faceless decision-making, citizens lose their connection to a sense of responsibility toward the world; without such a sense of responsibility, humanity loses its creative and progressive impulses.

Responsibility, then, “....is not a burden and it has nothing whatsoever to do with moral imperatives. Rather, it flows naturally out of an innate pleasure in making

⁷ibid., p. 62

manifest, in clarifying the obscure, in illuminating the darkness.”⁸ To take responsibility in this manner, to assert a ‘care for the world,’ becomes an existential act, for, as Canovan notes:

...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.⁹

Modernity—our superfluous condition—has made it easy for us to renege on our responsibility. Rather than combat the forces that generate anxiety, we would rather psychologically ‘trick’ ourselves by retreating into privacy, wherein one may resist angst, but at the cost of one’s *Existenz*. We must remember that, for Arendt, the world is always artifice; as soon as we lose that sense that we have this responsibility toward the maintaining and continuous re-creation of the world, then we have absented ourselves from establishing ‘care for the world.’ And when we renege our responsibility toward the world, as the totalitarian case demonstrates, we all too easily become, according to Arendt, “perverted animals.”¹⁰ And so, for Arendt, politics can be seen neither as rarefied nor elitist. Rather politics is crucial, “...not...an optional path to personal fulfillment for bored denizens of affluent societies, but as a matter of life and death.”¹¹

The question, however, remains: is this an adequate remedy, not only to dissolve the threat of totalitarian government, but also to permit humanity to

⁸ Hannah Arendt, “Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio,” *Men In Dark Times*, San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace. 1995 p 75

⁹ Margaret Canovan, 1992, op. cit., p. 106

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Mankind and Terror,” (1953), in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Jerome Kohn, ed. New York: Schocken Books. 1994 p. 304

¹¹ Margaret Canovan, 1992, op. cit., p. 275-6

overcome its sense of alienation from the world? Too much perhaps rests upon the “...assum[ption] that the link between publicity and the disclosure of reality in its fullness must also be a link between reality and free politics.”¹² Following Kateb, I want to draw attention to the existentialist impulse implicit in Arendt’s centering politics on ‘care of the world.’ As Kateb identifies, for Arendt, “...our humanity is tied to the absence of alienation—at least, the radical alienation in the modern age...Arendt seems to have a religious commitment to the notion that we exist to be at home in the world and on the earth, and that human identity depends on it.”¹³

What she offers us is less a means to *political* protection against the harms of modernity, but psychological protection: what might be psychologically invigorating protection against the modern does not necessarily translate into political purpose. It is not merely the ‘brass tacks’ of organization that are missing, but any sense of the *goals* of political action: “Her desire is to consider action as an autonomous phenomenon within the public sphere, rather than as a *means* to something else...”¹⁴ Surely this is a rather tenuous device for staving off the terrors with which Arendt is so concerned.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 113

¹³ George Kateb, 1983, *op. cit.*, p. 158

¹⁴ Dana Villa, 1996. *op. cit.*, p. 43

The public sphere as existential exercise

It should be little surprise that Arendt, given both her intellectual pedigree and the historical climate in which she wrote, would turn to an existentially-inspired invigoration of politics. Indeed, when she writes “...Existence can develop only in the shared life of human beings inhabiting a given world common to them all,”¹⁵ it is difficult to disagree with the claim that “...Arendt tried to democratize the philosophy of *Existenz* by reconnecting it, on a theoretical level, to some sort of transindividual community, be this a circle of communicating friends or the public world.”¹⁶ This, in and of itself suggests her political thought aligns with the *zeitgeist*. And undoubtedly, the attempts to reclaim the citizen-in-subjectivity make sense in the wake of totalitarianism.

Arendt is quite aware of the high stakes involved in bringing existentialism into the public sphere. However, despite the burdens it may place on the average citizen, she urges that participation is in the interest of the individual. Specifically, it promotes happiness, the antidote to angst. In commenting upon the student protests of the 1960s, she writes:

...another experience new for our time entered the game of politics: It turned out that acting is fun. This generation discovered what the eighteenth century had called “public happiness,” which means that when man takes part in public life he opens up for himself a dimension of human experience that otherwise remains closed to him and that in some way constitutes a part of complete “happiness.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, “What is Existential Philosophy?” (1946) in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Jerome Kohn, ed. New York: Schocken Books. 1994 p. 186

¹⁶ Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, 1994, op. cit., pp. 154-5

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution: A Commentary,” in *Crises of the Republic*. New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1972 p. 203

The public sphere is one that is intimately tied to the development of Self, but specifically, to finding some sort of human happiness. Publicity is thus integral to one's own well-being in modernity: public life is what allows us to press back against the threat of superfluosity of which totalitarianism took advantage. For Arendt, it is only by moving into and acting within the public sphere that each individual can struggle with the question of what he or she is as a person. Thus, Arendt hopes that we might fight the 'organized loneliness' of the modern condition, which, for her, "...is considerably more dangerous than the unorganized impotence of all those who are ruled by the tyrannical and arbitrary will of a single man."¹⁸ Against such loneliness, generated by conditions that seem beyond our control, Arendt identifies a means by which we might bring some semblance of control into our lives.

We must, however, be clear on which Self enters the public. Arendt herself makes this distinction unambiguously: "...it is precisely appearances that 'appear' in public, and inner qualities, gifts of heart or mind, are political only to the extent that their owner wishes to expose them in public, to place them in the limelight of the marketplace."¹⁹ It is about learning how to construct and become comfortable with, a public 'mask' that is distanced from an intimate understanding of the Self. What speaks to the world are the phenomenal manifestations of my Self, the ways in which I act and behave as a citizen. Thus, individuals "...avoid drowning in this terror (where I can't confirm my appearance to others)...[by]

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, 1968a, op. cit., p. 478

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken Books. 1983. p. 199

answer[ing] the question of who they are by telling a story about themselves that gives them the certainty that they are human beings.”²⁰ It is, in other words, the *persona* I display, not my individuality.

Arendt pries conscience from the realm of privacy. Conscience, instead becomes tied to publicity, wherein “action...bestows significance upon the life of man as a unique individual. Doomed as he is to mortality, he is nevertheless capable of acting and speaking in ways which reveal him as this irreplaceable person, without whom the human world would have been different.”²¹ In this turn, she is declaring something very different from liberal-inspired democratic models. For this is an argument that goes beyond the ‘rightness’ or ‘justice’ of placing government in the hands of the people. The politics of the public sphere is not that of the pursuit of concrete goals, but rather, of locating an expressive space.

Yes, Arendt attempts to convince us that the public sphere is necessary, perhaps even ‘fun.’ But the end of this device is not for the development of concrete plans for the future. Rather, the public sphere is a device which develops a psychological resistance to modern terrors. The danger with this, of course, is that politics is reduced to gestures that lack consequence. Politics loses its coherence and connection to the institutions and practices that shape the world in which we live. Politics, then, I want to suggest, is reduced to the experience of flailing at the totality. And this is precisely that from which Arendt wants us to escape: hers is not a suggestion of political goals for the future, but

²⁰ Bernard J. Bergen, *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and “The Final Solution”*, Lanham, MD and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield. 1998 p. 129

²¹ Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1974 p. 60

rather, a path to developing idealized (yet humane) citizens. That is, Arendt's stance on politics seems to be not only that it is 'good for you' but that it will also make you good.

The pristine citizen

Arendt's public sphere in many ways seems very familiar—the sort of deliberative model of republicanism that is constantly being assessed and reassessed in American political science. For, for Arendt (and others who value the public for its own sake) there is an implicit idealization of the psychological value of publicity. And this is my concern: to make public encounters central to a theory of politics has less to do with manifestations and balances of power than with sanctifying moral suasion.

However, in making this claim, we must be careful as to what is ascribed to Arendt's 'good' citizen. In her emphasis on the public sphere Arendt wants to incorporate interpersonal public relationships to the *res publica*, rather than limiting the political to the relationship of people to the state. And herein, we find what Arendt expects the person in the public sphere to recognize, an expectation that political life:

...is not a goal to be achieved once and for all, but an endless, lifelong task; what makes us human is the activity itself, not the goal. What matters is learning to make and repeatedly making the transition from private to public, from the narrow self to shared membership in the community.²²

²² Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public" in Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, eds. Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. 1994 p. 281

Though Arendt does not deny the importance of political rights, the demand and struggle for expanded political right is not what makes the world a habitable place. She asks us not to use some sort of principled measure to develop our critiques, our resistance, but rather, encourages the person *within himself* to become a manifestation of virtuous political action. When acting in the public sphere, Arendt asserts that

[b]y his manner of judging, the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of person he is, and this disclosure, which is involuntary, gains in validity to the degree that it has *liberated itself from merely individual idiosyncrasies*.²³

Recognizing this is what transforms a person into a citizen. Arendt is not, I believe, suggesting participation is in itself *morally* good. Rather, participation in the public sphere is precisely what prevents the danger of becoming a ‘mass man.’ Acting as a ‘good citizen’ becomes that which will permit the experience of existential flourishing, and politics a *therapeia* for the modern world. The activity of becoming a citizen is, for Arendt, what permits us to escape the ‘banality of evil’ ensconced in modernity.

Indeed, Arendt even seems to suggest a very limited role of the people vis-à-vis the state once democratic-republican norms have been established:

Such solidly established, firmly rooted political bodies as, for instance, the Republic of the United States need for their continued existence the spirit and the vigilance of their citizenry, but deeds of an idealistic nature are required and useful only in times of “clear and present danger”; at all other times they are only too likely to spoil the manners and customs of democracy. Democratic society as a living reality is threatened at the very moment that democracy becomes a “cause,” because then actions are

²³ Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance,” in Ronald Beiner and Jennifer Nedelsky, eds. *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt*, Lanham, MD and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield. 2001 p. 22, emphasis mine

likely to be judged and opinions evaluated in terms of ultimate ends and not on their inherent merits. The democratic way of life can be threatened only by people who see everything as a means to an end...²⁴

Given this logic, it should be no surprise that Canovan can claim that Arendt's politics ultimately seems "...lopsided...pay[ing] little attention to...life as conforming members of structures.²⁵ And surely it is these structures to which we must pay attention. For to pay attention, to engage in politics, is more than an abstract call to experience one's Being. Politics involves making assessments regarding policies that Arendt would surely consider banal or 'administrative.' Taxation, health care, minimum wages *et al.* surely have direct effects on how we experience our Being: the observation that "[i]t is not that Arendt is indifferent to social justice, but that she thinks, perhaps naively, that the demands of justice are (or should be) self-evident and, to that extent, unpolitical,"²⁶ is undoubtedly correct. Indeed, such 'boring' aspects of how politics is constituted and institutionalized surely affect our experience of 'justice' more than arguments suggesting that the Self will find fulfillment through participation.

We can, perhaps, be sympathetic to her views here: generating an existential resistance toward the tendencies of modernity to overwhelm humanity is undoubtedly a worthwhile enterprise. The difficulty, however, is that it does not readily translate into the organizational and structural imperatives required for advocating political demands:

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, "The Eggs Speak Up," (circa. 1951), in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Jerome Kohn, ed. New York: Schocken Books. 1994 pp. 280-81

²⁵ Margaret Canovan, 1974, *op. cit.*, p. 125

²⁶ Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 169, fn 114

What Arendt...seem[s] to ignore is that if rebellious politics is to be more than a self-actualizing and self-consuming phenomenon, then it must challenge and seek to reshape, however cautiously and imperfectly, existing political institutions. A viable radical politics, however rebellious and alive to the partiality of political movements and organizations, must constructively engage the state rather than simply oppose it or sidestep it through local forms of resistance. It must deepen rather than dismiss the institutions of representative democracy, in the name of current liberties and those yet to be won.²⁷

Instead, what Arendt offers us is 'promising' as the means by which we can care for the world:

Promises are a uniquely human way of ordering the future, making it predictable and reliable to the extent that this is humanly possible. And since the predictability of the future can never be absolute, promises are qualified by two essential limitations. We are bound to keep our promises provided that no unexpected circumstances arise, and provided that the mutuality inherent in all promises is not broken.²⁸

There are undoubtedly superficial arguments that can be made to counter promising as a central political tenet (e.g.: I could promise to eliminate an enemy; I could assert that circumstances have changed from my perspective and break the contract). Obviously, such arguments are outside Arendt's intent. The more important critique is that promising demands a *purified* citizen: she rests her politics on on the love of possibility, on the futurity of the neighbor. But, as we saw earlier with Augustine, it is the imperfect, fallible neighbor *in the present* toward whom we demonstrate *caritas*.

As we have seen time and again, Arendt can never acknowledge the situated neighbor, and it is that situated neighbor we must recognize, in all of his innate messiness, if the future is to unfold. For so long as that neighbor remains

²⁷ Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 1992 p. 247

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," in *Crises of the Republic*. New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1972 pp. 92-3

abstract, individuals are interchangeable with one another. Practically speaking, this means we do not see the struggles and interests an individual has in the here and now: all questions, and the resolutions to such questions, take on the rosy glow of some future perfect. That is, recalling Arendt's arguments regarding the 'social,' coupled with the love of the 'futurity' of the neighbor, the citizen *in a functioning state* is left with very little to do, other than expose his persona in public debate.

On this basis I want to suggest, following George Kateb's argument, "...that Arendt sets out to transform, to the fullest degree possible, political phenomena into aesthetic phenomena; that her interest in judgment is an interest in aesthetic judgment..."²⁹ And in this transformation, I think Kateb has also found an attempt to reconcile the political by resolving the ethical: "Arendt insists that action undertaken in the right spirit is 'neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of will.'"³⁰ That is, she ultimately asks us to change our attitudes towards, and thus our behaviors within, the realm of the political. Hers is a *performative* politics rather than a *substantive* politics. In shifting the domain of politics away from the relationship between people and institutions, political life becomes more about chattering spectatorship than about making demands upon the state.

²⁹ George Kateb, 2001, op. cit., p. 121

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 123

The social question revisited

Arendt fails to recognize the very important role the state in the modern condition has to play. Certainly, the states that embraced totalitarianism failed—*but not all states became totalitarian*. Nonetheless, Arendt seems highly suspicious of the apparatus of the state, regardless:

...since government is essentially organized and institutionalized power, the current question What is the end of government? does not make much sense either. The answer will be either question-begging—to enable men to live together—or dangerously utopian—to promote happiness or to realize a classless society or some other nonpolitical ideal, which if tried out in earnest cannot but end in some kind of tyranny.³¹

This is, however, an absurd statement. Indeed, it is perhaps even more than absurd—it is fundamentally dangerous. For as I regard this, Arendt, in her exuberance for the psychological protection against the terror of modernity, is dismissing the very apparatus that permits ‘experience’ in the first place. As Tony Judt states:

Only a state can provide the services and conditions through which its citizens may aspire to lead a good or fulfilling life. Those conditions vary across cultures: They may emphasize civic peace, solidarity with the less fortunate, public facilities of the infrastructural or even the high cultural sort, environmental amenities, free health care, good public education, and much else.³²

To neglect the *benefits* the state has provided is certainly a glaring omission.

Indeed, “...one could readily stand Arendt’s argument on its head and claim that one of modernity’s distinct political *successes* consists in having *broadened* questions of first-generation rights (civic and political equality) to encompass

³¹ Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic*. New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1972 pp. 150-1

³² Tony Judt, “The Social Question Redivivus,” in *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*. New York: Penguin. 2008, p. 423

second-generation rights (social equality)...”³³ But the *danger*, as I wish to describe it, is that bypassing the state in this way perhaps leads directly back to the superfluous condition Arendt so dreads. And this is, I also want to suggest, precisely because she makes the fatal error of mistaking totalitarianism for the totality. That is, she has not adequately distinguished the *psychological* condition from the political condition. This is not, I contend, a trivial matter: the condition of superfluosity is, as Arendt argues, a devastating one. But the failure to prevent such superfluosity is not, in the first instance, a psychological or ethical matter: *it is entirely political*.

What Arendt seems to insinuate throughout her works is that totalitarianism does not require an explicit choice. Rather, it is that people have been primed to accept the totalitarian. Or, as Canovan puts it, “[t]he 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.”³⁴ He is apparently seduced by “...the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part.”³⁵ But this, of course, is because “[modern masses] do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself.”³⁶ But perhaps those masses *did* recognize their experience,

³³ Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2001 p. 66

³⁴ Margaret Canovan, 1992, op. cit., p. 91

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, 1968a, op. cit., p. 349

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 349

that they *were* superfluous and that

[m]odernity held no hope for them, and so they expressed their resentment by turning against it and embracing atavistic and fundamentally irrational worldviews which lashed out equally against liberalism and socialism in the name of racist, organicist, xenophobic, and other fundamentally precapitalist values.³⁷

Undoubtedly, Arendt is correct to point to the dangers of the ‘mob’; but perhaps it is not the ‘mob’ in and of itself that is so dangerous, but rather, the displaced ‘mob.’ What she fails to see is that this displacement is very often the result, not of angst, but rather due to the lack of preventative policies adopted by the state. And this, indeed, was the problem of the interwar years: a lack of political will.³⁸

Nonetheless, let us take Arendt’s thought without addressing the historical error any further. For, concurrent with this misreading of political history is the nagging problem of the social, and the refusal to acknowledge the social as a part of the political. And this, more than her historical misstep, is what I view as her fatal error.

Perhaps Arendt doesn’t recognize that security—material security—is a requirement that goes beyond the merely administrative. For Judt is quite correct when he states that:

Whatever the gains in social legislation on working conditions and hours, education, the dissemination of culture, safeguarding health and the environment, insurance against homelessness, unemployment, and old age, and the limited redistribution of wealth, they are all vulnerable and politically contingent. There is no historical law that says they may not

³⁷ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Modern Radicalism*, New York and London: Routledge. 1992 p. 47

³⁸ For a thorough discussion, see *ibid.*, Chapter 2, “*Working Class Politics and the Nazi Triumph*,” pp. 33-55

someday be undone. For it is with social advance as with political freedoms: We must always stave off threats to what has been won, rather than presume these gains to be a secure part of some unassailable heritage.³⁹

This, to me, does not sound like greedy *cupiditas* run amok. Rather, it is precisely these ‘social rights’ that allow us to recognize ourselves in society. That is, social rights are what prevent an ‘excluded’ class—“...the losers—the de-skilled, the unskilled, the part-time, immigrants, the unemployed....”⁴⁰—from emerging. And the tragedy of the excluded, like Arendt’s superfluous people, is that “...they exist outside the conventional channels of employment or security, and with little prospect of reentering these channels or benefiting from the social liaisons that accompany them...”⁴¹ And, even more disturbingly, once excluded, “[t]hey cannot readily go somewhere else to find work, and even if they did, they would not find the social and psychic benefits that once accompanied it but would just be *exclus* somewhere else.”⁴² And this, the “...critical issue of our time,”⁴³ is one that I fear cannot be met by directing political life toward finding an ‘existential miracle.’

For what Arendt sacrifices to the existential recognition of others depends upon having the protection to express that recognition. That is, we must have recourse to the recognition of *rights*:

...rights create opportunities for persons to lead their lives on their own terms without having to anticipate punishment for doing so. Recognized rights, again, reduce the load of suffering in society. At the same time, however, the idea of rights as the creation of opportunities for action

³⁹ Tony Judt, 2008, op. cit., p. 425

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 416-17

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 414

⁴² *ibid.*, pp. 416-17

⁴³ *ibid.*, 2008, p. 417

honors agency, which is not a mere animal capacity for instinctive purposive action, but an invaluable and distinctively human attribute. In this regard, too, the idea of rights is not solely a moral idea, but also an existential one.⁴⁴

Her remedy to the angst of modernity, is of course, an *existential* appeal: calling on people to resist the totalitarian impulse primarily through recognizing each others' humanity, rather than turning to *political* resistance through laws and the principled actions of parties and state institutions. The weakness of such existentialist appeals, where we 'think without banisters', where "[w]e simply are in the position of acting and judging without rules given to us from outside,"⁴⁵ is that we lose sight of the goals we are trying to achieve. It is all well and good to say that the goal is 'freedom' or 'justice,' but these are concepts that require elaboration. What does this proposed 'freedom' or 'justice' look like? And perhaps more importantly, what methods do we use to both measure and protect these ideals? Arendt seems to suggest that it is the people, in and of themselves, undertake this, and that so long as we become 'good citizens,' we shall understand. But this sounds too much like mytho-poetic fantasy. It is only when we can conscientiously engage with the mundane of rules, regulations and institutional structures that we may determine our experience of human freedom. Unless we can tie material conditions to her 'existential miracle,' our politics will be devoid of content.

What Arendt has done, despite her best intentions, is to obfuscate the future and the political demands we might make in moving toward that future: in a world

⁴⁴ George Kateb, "Existential Values in Arendt's Treatment of Evil and Morality," *Social Research* Vol 74: No 3 : Fall 2007 811-854 p. 825

⁴⁵ Margaret Canovan, 1992, op. cit., p. 174

where the public sphere becomes abstract, critique becomes impossible, for the standards we may use to judge have likewise disappeared. History, of course, is not guaranteed, but the state remains the best apparatus to ensure that historical progress may continue. The problem, though, is that the state as an institution, as an intermediary, has been under attack from both right and left. While Arendt may indeed ask all the right questions about life in the conditions of modernity, her resolutions fall flat when we think of them in terms of social and political arrangements. Her public sphere strips us of far too much: all of those everyday concerns are off limits; principled critique too seems to be disqualified. Arendt's purpose seems hollow: we might become 'better' citizens, but does this really alter our circumstances? For ultimately, what she provides us with is a politics that avoids concretely confronting our collective future. She gives us a model citizen, but it is a citizen who has only the sparest of frameworks in which to pursue political goals.

Chapter 7

The Encumbrance of *History*

As a resolution to the modern condition, Arendt's public sphere is highly problematic. Undoubtedly, there is a certain sense to it: the existential crisis of modernity does require some sort of grounding, some sort of device to prevent slipping into angst and superfluity, and in that regard, her public sphere does perhaps succeed. But does it respond to what we need in *political* terms? Her public sphere suggests a rather civilized and educative political community. But her emphasis is on behavior rather than on asking what it is we want from political life. We are to 'care for the world,' but it is a world in which humanity is seen only abstractly, wherein the consequences of day-to-day life are largely trivial to political discussion. Arendt proposes a political *morality*, but not a vision of the arrangements we might require to develop political goals.

What prevents her political thought from having the ability to engage with goals? I think the answer is quite simple, but is one that, unfortunately, has permeated so much of political thought coming out of modernity: she must necessarily reject teleological History; but in doing so, she has elided the Tradition (or History) with traditions of political thought. She fails to distinguish between the 'grand narrative' approach and that of political traditions articulating

the principles and interests of historically situated people. She sees these traditions—ideologies—as positing schematic endpoints, which, once achieved, put an end to politics itself.

But this, unfortunately, misses the point. Political traditions are based around concerns generated by historical conditions; they are attempts to respond to the world. Most importantly, what ideologies provide are ‘sounding boards’, that act as reflective moments of judgment by allowing us to keep in mind what are our political goals. We should also note that political goals need not necessarily adopt a ‘grand narrative’ character; much more likely, we are to use these goals to consider whether a particular action advances the principle of said ideological position. Without such focus on goals, we shall end up in the situation of ‘mere talk,’ or perhaps even worse, a world without any sort of intelligible meaning. Without ideology—traditions—in which to hang our opinions, all opinion becomes self-referential, and the ability to build solidarity—even for such an abstract notion as that of safeguarding humanity—will be happenstance at best. This is the attractive trap, into which, I believe, Arendt ultimately falls.

Without doubt, the camps of the twentieth century—whether Nazi or Soviet—are the antithesis of all for which the Enlightenment stands. And thus, there is a genuine need to confront how such horrors could emerge, how humanity could have failed so drastically, where “Nazism is actually the breakdown of all German and European traditions, the good as well as the bad.”¹ It should come as no

¹ Steve E. Ascheim, “Introduction,” in Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem. Steve E. Ascheim (ed.),. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2001 pp. 12-13

surprise that Arendt, like so many of her contemporaries, turns this fact of the camps into the place from which her political thought emerges. And of course, any response to the camps, other than the silent horror of disbelief, is difficult to muster. Perhaps, then, we need to have a certain amount of sympathy for the immediate finger pointing toward the excesses of ideology, wherein

Arendt needs to invent a kind of political impartiality out of the epistemological crisis of totalitarianism. In the absence of the framework of universal moral concepts that totalitarianism shattered, its critics must proceed historically, employing categories of understanding that are given by the particular phenomenon itself.²

However, what is really at question is this notion that totalitarianism shattered ‘universal moral concepts.’ While Disch is undoubtedly correct in pointing out that this assumption underlies Arendt’s political thought, it is precisely this assumption I want to address. Specifically, I want to question the epistemological validity of this stance. For, if totalitarianism becomes an epistemological crisis, and Arendt and her fellow-travelers are correct, then ideology does indeed become circumspect. Indeed, politics itself becomes hollowed of intent beyond an

...“apolitical” formalism...[which] unconsciously reflected what Daniel Bell called “the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties” and – with an eye cast on the prewar years – a pervasive sense that the attempt to change reality for the better would have to continue “without me” (*ohne mich*). Even...Max Horkheimer, could write in 1947: “Is activism then, especially political activism, the sole means of fulfillment?...I hesitate to say so. The age needs no added stimulus to action.”³

In this respect, Arendt deserves credit, for despite her own blind spots, she

² Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 1994. p. 130

³ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Modern Radicalism*. New York and London: Routledge. 1992 pp. 101-2

does categorically refuse this stance of '*ohne mich*': for her, the only thing remaining to humanity *is* political activity. But it is, nonetheless, a political activity that operates against the backdrop of the total "...break with all our traditions; [that has] clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment."⁴ In accepting this interpretation of the meaning of totalitarianism in the world, Arendt's own political judgment is circumscribed: the entirety of the world has been tainted by this, and thus, the world must be politically reconstructed, according to an entirely different set of epistemological premises—the turn to action, in and of itself in the public sphere. But the experience of totalitarianism also causes her to discard too much, and to point fingers in the wrong directions: she refuses to acknowledge that totalitarianism was a political event: *it was a choice*.

Arendt, however, presents totalitarianism as some sort of culmination of the Western tradition, wherein "...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.'"⁵ But while Arendt has given us astute insights into the *psychology* of totalitarianism, she may have gotten the politics dreadfully wrong. And this, I want to suggest, is directly linked to her stubborn refusal to acknowledge the extant competition within western thought.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)," (1954), in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Jerome Kohn, ed. New York: Schocken Books. 1994 pp. 309-310

⁵ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. p. 68

Totalitarianism becomes the culmination of the ‘Archimedean vantage point’ of the Western Tradition, for it is with “...Hitler and Stalin were the great political potentialities of the ideologies discovered.”⁶ Arendt’s implication here, of course, is that there is a monolithic quality in the Western Tradition, that Hitler and Stalin merely collated and made palatable what was already present. That is, the totalitarian impulse was that of converting enough ‘reasonable individuals’ to the “poisonous fictions” of “...coerc[ing] the world into total consonance with the pattern fantasized in an ideology.”⁷ And this conversion, Arendt suggests, is because totalitarianism is preceded by a faith in History. That is, ‘reasonable individuals’ could be swayed to not be left behind in the dust of History:

The moral issue arose...not with fear-inspired hypocrisy, but with this very early eagerness not to miss the train of History, with this, as it were, honest overnight change of opinion that befell a great majority of public figures in all walks of life and all ramifications of culture...In brief, what disturbed us was not our enemies but our friends, who had done nothing to bring this situation about. They were not responsible for the Nazis, they were only impressed by the Nazi success and unable to pit their own judgment against the verdict of History.⁸

Thus, when the totalitarian moment emerges, Arendt characterizes it much less as a conscientious political choice, than as fated by the *idea* of History. And so, she rejects ideological thinking on the same ground that she must reject History: both impose a teleology and “...teleological accounts of action are irreconcilable with the freedom born of human plurality and the public sphere. They deny the open-endedness of action, demanding a prior posting of goals in

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, London and San Diego: Harcourt, Inc. 1968. p. 468

⁷ George Kateb, “Fiction as Poison,” in *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*. Roger Berkowitz et al, eds. New York: Fordham University Press. 2010. p. 30

⁸ Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken Books. 1983. p. 24

order for the activity—now viewed as *process*—to have either meaning or value.”⁹

Indeed, what she wants to direct us toward is a view of ideological thinking as a type of ‘non-thinking’:

Deductive reasoning, where everything follows once you admit the first premise, allows no escape within the limits of merely logical thinking: there is no way out of the tramlines of the argument, however much common sense may cry out against its conclusion. This suspicion of deductive logic (which seems to her to have essential affinities with dogmatism and ideology) pervades her thought. More fundamentally, however, the whole notion of absolute truth, the truth of a system or a doctrine, seems to her to be a threat to the freedom characteristically embodied in the life of politics simply because it allows no room for human diversity.¹⁰

What is pernicious for Arendt is the very seductive way ideologies hermetically seal the future, wherein everything is known by an *a priori* set of principles, and in which thought is reduced to “...mere abstract logical deductions and conclusions.”¹¹ Thus it is when ‘logicality’ takes over that is the real threat to humanity for Arendt, that “...the tyranny of logicality prevents ideological thinking from ever being disturbed by experience or instructed by reality.”¹² Thus, Arendt can claim that ideological assumptions substitute for independent thought, and that herein lies the true threat to mankind. Man sacrifices his freedom to logicality:

⁹ Dana Villa, Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1996. p. 47

¹⁰ Margaret Canovan, The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1974 p. 114

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding,” in Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism, Jerome Kohn, ed. New York: Schocken Books. 1994 p. 356

¹² Dana R. Villa, “Thinking and Judging,” in The Judge and the Spectator: Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy, Joke J. Hermesen & Dana R. Villa, eds.. Leuven, Belgium : Peeters. 1999 p. 14

The law of movement itself, Nature or History, singles out the foes of mankind and no free action of mere men is permitted to interfere with it. Guilt and innocence become meaningless categories; “guilty” is he who stands in the path of terror, that is, who willingly or unwillingly hinders the movement of Nature or History. The rulers, consequently, do not apply laws, but execute such movement in accordance with its inherent law; they claim to be neither just nor wise, but to know “scientifically.”¹³

It is obvious why Arendt wants to move away from ‘ideological’ thinking: ideology disengages us from our existential selves. To accept History is to accept certainty, and with certainty comes not just the casting of victors and villains, but—and this is the crucial point for Arendt—imposition of criteria upon our lives that can no longer be viewed as having been created by men. So long as we live our lives by this imposed, ‘artificial’ standard, a ‘dangerous fiction,’ the world is unrecognizable as something ‘manmade.’ Most importantly, however, is the need to cut politics away from History. If we have the certainty that we have rightness on our side, we lose the ability to think, to reassess, to contemplate and consider what is present before us, rather than hoping that we are acting to the benefit of some imagined future. Politics thus takes on an urgency in the Arendtian universe, but not to fulfill some hoped-for future. Rather, the urgency is located in the moment, the now.

The problem with this position, however, is that it lumps all varieties of political thought together into a single, incoherent mass. And, if we cannot distinguish amongst the varieties of political thought, it seems to me that it is highly unlikely that we might ever recover the ‘reasonable individual.’ For what we lose is the understanding of the totalitarian moment as the culmination of a

¹³ Hannah Arendt, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding,” *op. cit.* p.342

tradition that *rejects* the Enlightenment. And such distinctions, I believe, are an absolute requirement: each of the traditions within political thought require differing compositions of the public Self. That is, the distinctions between political traditions describe and determine the rights and responsibilities of political life; the sorts of institutional arrangements we possess; and the relationship between the public and the governing apparatus.

The pristine citizen of Arendt's public sphere is one who is able to distinguish between that which is 'properly public' and that which is 'properly private'; recalling her antipathy toward concerns of the 'social' the domain of the private is quite large. But in doing this, she raises a point which, as uncomfortable as it might make us, contains a certain validity. For this private sphere, as she envisions it, is exclusive and discriminatory, but necessary for the coherence of the public realm:

...discrimination is as indispensable a social right as equality is a political right. The question is not how to eliminate discrimination, but how to keep it confined within the social sphere, where it is legitimate, and prevent its trespassing on the political and the personal sphere, where it is destructive.¹⁴

Herein, there is something that is vitally important to consider when we enter public life, for there is a contemporary tendency to turn all life choices into political moments. That is, there is a problem with turning everyday life into a political issue. Perhaps we should not be surprised that the totality of everyday life can now be politicized; it is the legacy of leftist critique of the 1960s:

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken Books. 1983. p. 206

The partisans of the New Left felt they had a world to win. Contesting imperialism, racism, and a burgeoning “culture industry,” they naturally considered themselves ‘political.’ In fact, every aspect of life took on that connotation as ‘the personal’ became ‘political’; indeed, without any organizational or institutional referent, ‘political’ resistance became synonymous with an assault on the culture as a whole. The ‘political,’ however, thereby became robbed of any determinate meaning. Symbolism was confused with programmatic action and, in the process, it became impossible for the movement to gain a sense of ideological coherence or enforce discipline. Conformity to the dictates of an organization were, after all, the enemy.¹⁵

For what the critique of the New Left brings us to is the paralysis where every choice one might make becomes overdetermined with *meaning*, and thus, all personal choices can become subject to scrutiny: a simple tomato is no longer a mere foodstuff, but is symbolic of ever-increasing permutations of symbolic *righteousness*. And Arendt is thus quite right to severely delineate the private from the public. But she does so for perhaps the wrong reasons. Perhaps it is less tyranny we must be concerned with and more that when everything is politicized, political discussion becomes impossible. For what we come up against, when we become consumed with the rightness or wrongness of myriad trivial decisions, is political subjectivity. That is, as Bronner states: “Resistance instead would now require an aesthetic-philosophical assertion of subjectivity, an anti-political form of politics...”¹⁶

The reasoning here is, I believe, quite simple: if we cannot refer back to a reason for, and justification of why, we advocate a particular policy, there seems to be little reason to advocate *any* position. Our choice of outcomes becomes

¹⁵ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Moments of Decision: Political History and the Crises of Modern Radicalism*, op. cit., p. 105

¹⁶ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2004 p. 97

willy-nilly, without any sense of purpose. That is, politics becomes justified by my personal decisions, and as personal decisions, they can never be rebutted. But more importantly, trivial acts, as symbolic gestures, come to mean more than actively pursuing a political program of some sort: so long as I purchase my locally-grown organic tomatoes from the co-op, I can sleep well at night. I am ‘doing my part.’ This is, of course, the height of narcissism and is politically devastating. It is undoubtedly banal.

Transcendence and human culture

To be banal—as Arendt’s Eichmann demonstrates—is to exist in an unreflective world. But, as Arendt’s opus points out, such reflective behavior is difficult—if not impossible—in the modern condition. Her project, as I see it, is an attempt to create a place for political thought and action that skirts the need for transcendence. And yes, transcendence as it has been typically denominated in political thought, historically speaking, has lost its traction in the modern condition. Moreover, we are right to be wary of transcendence as a motive force in political action, for just as a transcendental standpoint can be utilized for progressive emancipatory projects, it can also be used in reactionary negating ways. Thus, we need to judge the transcendental posed before us, rejecting or utilizing on the basis of its ability to address immanent conditions: it must be rooted in an ethical concern for humanity. Simply because transcendence in politics has been inappropriately used, does not mean that transcendence itself

is a 'dangerous' or even 'monstrous' concept. Indeed, I fear that if we eliminate a transcendental element altogether the results could prove even more disastrous than removing transcendence.

Transcendence is what allows us to look past our immediate condition and project, via critique of the immediate, to what we want the future to look like. And it is in this reflexive use of the transcendent that we escape the banal. But note here that this transcendent is not some sort of idealism or utopian project. In rejecting idealism Arendt was indeed correct, for idealism articulates a faith in an end. What has become all too apparent in the modern condition is that such ends as posed by idealism are impossible (except that, of course, of total annihilation of the earth and its species). Our concern must be to negotiate a world without faith in the future.

For what she disparages is culture, in particular what she sees as a culture infused with banality. Arendt's folly is surely to turn culture into politics—she wants culture and politics to be synonymous. But that is a totalitarian enterprise, for it is an adjudication of taste. This lumping of culture and politics together seems to be the problem of political life today, where those on the left are highly suspicious of 'red-state' behaviors, with those on the right equally suspicious of 'blue-state' behaviors, without coming to speak about the goals and interests of the other. That is, we are far more likely to assume a set of values given outward appearances. Likewise, we may be much more conscious of adopting 'acceptable' beliefs on the basis of those in whose company we feel more comfortable. Perhaps this is what Arendt means when speaking of

'thinking without banisters,' that we should not sacrifice our goals to cultural comfort. But this is a discussion she never fully clarifies, never directly expresses, let alone resolves. Far too much of what she says can be taken back and forth, leading to the many varied 'takes' there are on her writing. Depending upon what categories one privileges, what preferences one already has on coming to her writing will determine what one takes away from her message. In that respect then, her political writing is a failure, for all we are left with is an aesthetic. And an aesthetic is surely not enough.

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