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**University of Southampton**

Faculty of Law, Arts and Social Sciences

School of Humanities

**Being Political and the Reconstitution of Public Discourse:  
Hannah Arendt on Experience, History and the Spectator**

by

**Jonathan Wolfe Leader**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2010

**University of Southampton**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study analyses a number of Hannah Arendt's books and essays written over four decades and suggests that a common thread can be detected that links together the different stages of her thought. The need to do this follows from having to treat with caution Arendt's own judgement that in the mid-1930s her thinking changed when she became political. In relation to writings she produced throughout her life, what can be seen is that she was actually preoccupied by one and the same question, namely, what it means to be with other people, she just looked for answers in different places and used different methods. The study shows how in her dissertation on Saint Augustine's treatment of love and such early published pieces as 'The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question' and her commentary on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, Arendt was already challenging Heidegger's ontology, in *Being and Time*, of 'being-with-one-another'. Her thinking at this time was purely empirical though, dependent upon interpretations of history alone. Her later work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, for instance, reveal that Arendt's political conversion amounted to the realisation that ontology and history are as necessary to each other as Kant's concepts and intuitions. Her defence of plurality therefore, represented both a reaction to the evils of totalitarianism on the grounds that it is an *anti*-political form of government, and a revised challenge to Heidegger's assessment of *das Man* on his own terms. In addition though, Arendt's depiction of public space and public discourse, suggested that choosing to be with others politically, is an antidote to the solitude of the individual engendered by mass society.

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## DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Jonathan Wolfe Leader, declare that the thesis entitled,

*Being Political and the Reconstitution of Public Discourse: Hannah Arendt on Experience, History and the Spectator*

and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission.

**Signed:** .....

**Date:** 30 June 2010

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## List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used for some of the main works cited in the text.

### Works of Hannah Arendt

<b><i>BPF</i></b>	<i>Between Past and Future</i>
<b><i>EiU</i></b>	<i>Essays in Understanding</i>
<b><i>HC</i></b>	<i>The Human Condition</i>
<b><i>LKPP</i></b>	<i>Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy</i>
<b><i>LSA</i></b>	<i>Love and Saint Augustine</i>
<b><i>OT</i></b>	<i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i>
<b><i>PHA</i></b>	<i>The Portable Hannah Arendt</i>
<b><i>RLC</i></b>	<i>Reflections on Literature and Culture</i>
<b><i>TJW</i></b>	<i>The Jewish Writings</i>

### Works of Immanuel Kant

<b><i>CoJ</i></b>	<i>Critique of Judgement</i>
<b><i>CPR</i></b>	<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i>
<b><i>RRT</i></b>	<i>Religion and Rational Theology</i>
<b><i>RBMR</i></b>	<i>Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: and other Writings</i>

### Works of Friedrich Nietzsche

<b><i>UM</i></b>	<i>Untimely Meditations</i>
<b><i>GM</i></b>	<i>On the Genealogy of Morality</i>

### Works of Martin Heidegger

<b><i>BW</i></b>	<i>Basic Writings</i>
<b><i>BT</i></b>	<i>Being and Time</i>

## INTRODUCTION

*Existenz itself is never essentially isolated; it exists only in communication and in the knowledge of the Existenz of others. One's fellow men are not (as in Heidegger) an element, which though structurally necessary, nevertheless destroys Existenz; but, on the contrary, Existenz can develop only in the togetherness of men in the common given world. In the concept of communication there lies embedded, though not fully developed, a new concept of humanity as the condition for man's Existenz.*

Hannah Arendt<sup>1</sup>

In an interview with Günter Gaus broadcast on West German television in late 1964 Hannah Arendt candidly observed that as a young Berliner during the early nineteen thirties she was not at all involved in politics.<sup>2</sup> While she had been an avid reader of the German press and had certainly formulated some opinions of her own (she was sure, for instance, that the Nazis would eventually gain power) she had not been a member of a political party nor had she felt inclined towards joining one. It was only in 1933 with the burning of the Reichstag that she realised she needed to become politically active; she no longer wanted to ‘simply be a bystander’.<sup>3</sup> Aged twenty-six, she lost her political innocence to the Zionist Organisation for whom she readily agreed ‘to put together a collection of all anti-Semitic statements made in ordinary circumstances’ – in ‘professional clubs’, for example, and in ‘all kinds of professional journals’.<sup>4</sup> As a result of her research Arendt was found out though, arrested, and interrogated for just over a week. She was fortunate: her Nazi interrogator was ‘a charming fellow’ who, she said, strove to do what he could to get her released.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Hannah Arendt, ‘What is Existenz Philosophy?’, in *Partisan Review* 1, 13 (1946): 55–56.

2 Hannah Arendt, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains’: A Conversation with Günter Gaus”, in *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 1–23. Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *EiU*.

3 *Ibid.*, 5.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, 6.



One might draw from this the conclusion that 1933 was something of a watershed in Hannah Arendt's life and in the sense that her new found political awareness and political commitment set her on a course that would lead her to make an exemplary contribution to *political* philosophy up until the mid-1970s it was, indeed, a point of departure. Yet in another sense Arendt's political awakening in the nineteen thirties did not deflect her from pursuing questions that had already been troubling her for several years, questions about who we are, what our place in the world amounts to and what we can and cannot do. These were questions about 'Existenz', questions about our fundamental being in the world which, as a student of Martin Heidegger in the mid-nineteen twenties it would have been quite natural for her to pose. In his seminal work *Being and Time*, Heidegger had not only made it clear 'that we should raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*', of *Sein*, but he had gone on to state 'that the "subject character" of one's own Dasein and that of Others is to be defined existentially – that is, in terms of certain ways in which one may be'.<sup>6</sup> In her essay entitled 'What is Existenz Philosophy?' published in 1946 Hannah Arendt would translate 'Existenz' as a word indicating 'the being of man'<sup>7</sup> and post-1933, questions concerning 'the being of man' continued to preoccupy her. What, it seems to me, had changed though, was where she believed she now needed to look in order to try and find answers. Her attention fixed on politics and on the public realm.

In the late 1920s, while researching her doctoral thesis, Arendt had looked to Saint Augustine for illumination about Existenz.<sup>8</sup> Under the supervision of Karl Jaspers at

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6 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 161. Hereafter abbreviated *BT*. The initial quote is from page 1. The quoted words that follow are from page 163.

7 Arendt, 'What is Existenz Philosophy?', 34.

8 *Hannah Arendt, Love and Saint Augustine*, edited by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott, & Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996). Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *LSA*.

Heidelberg University she had reflected on Augustine's writings on love and how he had, she believed, succeeded in making 'the neighbour' a meaningful and a significant other deserving of brotherly love despite the material world and all its contents being of limited value within the orbit of a truly Christian life. We know that Hannah Arendt had been in love with Heidegger while she was his student at Marburg and had moved to Heidelberg to complete her research in order, literally, to put distance between herself and her former teacher when their relationship broke down.<sup>9</sup> However, their geographical separation in the late nineteen twenties was also matched by the beginnings of an intellectual fissure, I think, which only grew with the passing of time and in particular with Heidegger's post-war refusal to acknowledge the significance of the *Shoah*. Arendt's early differences with him did not reflect, I would argue, purely the reaction of a woman scorned in love. Augustine illuminated for her a possible way of responding to the question about what it means *to be with others*, or as Heidegger labelled it, 'Being-with-one-another' that he, Heidegger, had simply been unable to provide to her satisfaction.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Arendt would return to her doctoral dissertation in later life with a view to clarifying and reworking some of her earlier ideas, and such was the weight of Augustine's message in her view that even in her final work, *The Life of the Mind*, which she was writing at the time of her death in 1975, Augustine was still very much a source of inspiration.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to probing Augustine for illumination about fundamental questions concerning human existence, Arendt, in the years immediately following the completion of her doctoral research in 1929, grappled with two existential questions

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9 See Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (Newhaven: Yale University Press, 1982).

10 *BT*, 163.

11 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, edited by Mary McCarthy (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978).

that lead her to draw on the ideas of other thinkers as well. These questions might be summed up as follows: ‘What does it mean *to be* a Jew?’ and ‘What does it mean *to be with others* in a world without God?’. In, for example, her essay entitled ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’ published in 1932 she addressed the first of these questions and was greatly inspired by the ideas of both Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Gottfried Herder, while in the only work she ever co-authored, her commentary on Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* (1930), written with her first husband, Günther Stern, it was to one of Germany’s most celebrated poets that she turned.<sup>12</sup> In each case Arendt can be seen as, again, looking for clarification about man’s relationship to the world around him and about God and about how men relate to each other. Even when she focused on the so-called ‘Jewish question’ contributing in the process to an ongoing German-Jewish dialogue that had started with the Enlightenment, she addressed far more than an issue purely about the integration of the Jews into German society. What she had to say applied much more broadly to the manner in which groups of any type, be they national, class-based or religious see themselves and communicate. Man’s experience within the world in the very broadest of terms always remained central to the investigations she undertook throughout her life.

‘The Enlightenment’ paper and a number of what have been collected together as her *Jewish* writings, many of which were written in the nineteen thirties and nineteen forties, are also valuable because they provide clues about what “Jewishness” meant

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12 Hannah Arendt, ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’ in Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, edited by Jerome Kohn & Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 3-18. Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *TJW*. Arendt and Stern, *RLC*, 22-23.

to Hannah Arendt as an individual.<sup>13</sup> Her stance was very different, for example, to many of her Jewish contemporaries or near contemporaries, thinkers like Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Gershon Scholem. A proud Jew, Arendt was nevertheless, in no sense committed to breathing new life into Judaism as were, say, Rosenzweig and Buber. In fact, her criticisms of the way the Eichmann trial was conducted, for instance, got her into hot water with many Jews, including Scholem, and lost her a number of personal friends prompting the view that she was, perhaps, even a “self-hater”. If anything though, her example demonstrated the nonsense of trying to apply the label ‘Jewish thinker’ to an individual like her.

It was what the *Shoah* exposed as a crime against *all mankind* albeit one perpetrated upon the Jews specifically, a crime furthermore, to which Arendt was herself *witness*, that marked the real turning point in her life, one bearing far more significance, I think, than anything she had previously experienced. If her dissertation on Augustine had revealed an emerging critical distance between her and Heidegger, the increasing detachment of the student from the teacher indicating her growing self-reliance, it was the *Shoah* and in particular Heidegger’s response to it in the decades following the Second World War that continued to widen the gap between them. For Arendt, the *Shoah* and the emergence of, what she labelled, ‘totalitarian government’ marked a breaking point not in the continuous flow of history as such, which as she noted in the preface to her collection of essays entitled *Between Past and Future* would be an impossibility, but in terms of the way we could surely no longer avoid thinking about ourselves now in the aftermath of the wickedness that had been unleashed.<sup>14</sup> Even

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13 Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, edited by Jerome Kohn & Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007). Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *TJW*.

14 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951). Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *OT*.

with the defeat of National Socialism and the demise of Stalinism Arendt contended, ‘the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar [*sic*] intellectual life in Europe – as death became the fundamental problem after the last war’.<sup>15</sup> There was no going back; it would be impossible now to return the (evil) genie to the bottle.

If Heidegger’s starting point in *Being and Time* had been to revive a sense of ‘perplexity at our inability to understand the expression “Being”’,<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt came to view her own task in the years following the Second World War as more and more that of making the incomprehensibility of what had occurred in Europe intelligible. She attempted to do this by continuing to clarify the possibilities in regard to *being with others* – but now in distinctly political terms. Totalitarian regimes had demonstrated with chilling effect how individuals could be stripped of their humanity to such a degree that they could be made to exist in proximity to one another in what amounted to a condition of utter *non-plurality*. The concentration and death camps and the Gulags, reduced each of their victims to a *Muselmann* and in so doing totalitarianism had disclosed itself as the very apotheosis of the *anti-political*. Such was the depravity of what had taken place in the camps and the Gulags that the actions of those who had perpetrated their beastly deeds in these terrible places seemed to defy all attempts to explain and to judge them in conventional moral and political terms. Something of an intellectual hiatus had thus been created. Totalitarianism represented, as far as she was concerned, a completely new form of government based upon destruction and sheer terror. Its like, she contended, had never before been witnessed in human history.

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<sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘Nightmare and Flight’ in *EiU*, 134. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2006). Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *BPF*.

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, *BT*, 1.

The break in history that the appearance of totalitarianism signalled demanded, she believed, that we reconsider our conceptual frameworks, *reorient* our thinking (*pace* Kant) and re-plot those reference points according to which we exercise judgement in order to make sense of the world and conduct our affairs in it.<sup>17</sup> The emergence out of totalitarian movements of totalitarian regimes had prised past and future apart as it were (and here, I think, echos of Walter Benjamin's philosophy of historical rupture can be discerned in Arendt's work) exposing a gap, which she argued, obliged us to think afresh about our actions and about the possibilities that exist in respect of how we might *be with one another*.<sup>18</sup> There were, she thought, 'few guides left through the labyrinth of inarticulate facts if opinions are discarded and tradition is no longer accepted as unquestionable'.<sup>19</sup> To ask about being in this fashion had though, shades of Heidegger about it – albeit, of course, with an Arendtian twist. It was not to ask about Being with a capital 'B' but rather about the world in which *human* beings live together. It was certainly not about the articulation of eternal and necessary Platonic truths that are the product of silent and solitary contemplation. It concerned rather, men's judgements about events as they materialised out of the dynamic contexts of the communities they shared. In other words, to ask about being on Arendt's terms was to engage in public political discourse *with* others. This was to bring to the fore *communication* in place of Heideggerian interrogation. If 'the Heideggerian asker lays himself open to that which is being questioned and becomes the vulnerable locus, the permeable space of its disclosure', for Arendt, to jump ahead of ourselves just a little,

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17 See Immanuel Kant, 'What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' in *Religion and Rational Theology* (hereafter *RRT*), translated & edited by Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7–18.

18 See, for example, Arendt, *BPF*. See also, Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn (Bungay, Suffolk: Fontana/Collins, 1973).

19 Arendt, *OT*, 9.

it was public space that would become the all important site of for such achievement.<sup>20</sup> Her focus would not be, as it was in Heidegger's project, *Dasein's* burden 'to guard the truth of Being'. Man's role, as far as she was concerned, was not to serve merely as Being's 'shepherd'.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, she would argue, '[...] the world is the primary thing', not Being, not even 'man, neither man's life nor his self'.<sup>22</sup> It was the world captured in the plurality of men's disinterested judgements, themselves subject to innumerable alterations throughout human history, that was of paramount importance.

Nevertheless, as Heidegger noted, 'Any inquiry, as an inquiry about something, has *that which is asked about*'.<sup>23</sup> And, like Heidegger what Arendt *asked about* concerned something *fundamentally ontological* though somewhat less mysterious than Being.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, her inquiries would eventually, post-1945 to be more precise, result in what amounted to an ontological as much as a political, or even empirical/historical response to *Being and Time*. In 1958, for example, she published *The Human Condition*, a pioneering piece of work, in which she discussed the formal structures that make possible different types of human action.<sup>25</sup> Prior to this analysis, though still post-war, her inquiries focused on specific 'entities' in the world, and in this she too mimicked Heidegger who had described such a task as being part of 'The Formal Structure of the Question of Being'.<sup>26</sup> Here, for instance, she considered precisely the nature, complexity and the "origins" of what she identified as that completely new

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20 George Steiner, *Heidegger* (Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks, 1978), 57.

21 Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism' in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (hereafter abbreviated *BW*), edited by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1978), 210.

22 Arendt, *BPF*, 222.

23 Heidegger, *BT*, 24. Emphasis in original.

24 *Ibid.*, 34.

25 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

26 Heidegger, *BT*, 24 – 28.

political phenomenon called totalitarianism, which all importantly, she believed, embodied a crime against the basic structure of Being itself as demonstrated by the egregious treatment of millions of human beings whose fate it was to come under its dominion.

In posing her questions Hannah Arendt was, of course, disclosing something extremely important about herself and about us too as questioners. In the first place, and here she was very much in agreement with Heidegger, she demonstrated that whenever we try to understand the world in which we live, whenever we orient ourselves in that world, our inescapable relationship to the question of the meaning of being is revealed. In other words, our asking about the meaning of being ‘is coextensive with our [human] existence’.<sup>27</sup> More than this, however, Arendt confirmed that thinking about the world, trying to make it intelligible to ourselves, is actually *constitutive* of who we are as human beings. Human nature is not, as it was for Hobbes or for Locke or for Rousseau, for instance, something fixed and separate from whatever we might think about ourselves. Thinking about who we are and what, in actuality, we are are the same. What does this imply? It implies, I think, that, notwithstanding the fundamental ontology that conditions human existence, we are able to *alter* the way in which we live. We are not slaves to, or at the mercy of, laws of human nature from which we are unable to extricate ourselves. We can change. To this extent Arendt was still in agreement with Heidegger. However, the critical differences between them lay not very far below the surface.

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27 Jonathan Rée, *Heidegger* (London: Phoenix, 1998), 8.



The position Hannah Arendt adopted throughout her life reflected a degree of optimism, particularly in the wake of Europe's descent into the darkness of the Second World War, that was not always matched in the writings or the feelings, for that matter, of her contemporaries. Here, for example, we might cite the more negative and pessimistic outlooks of the Frankfurt School thinkers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. While Arendt settled down quite happily to a life of research and writing in the United States of America, Adorno's melancholy over being in America was, in contrast, clearly captured in his observation that 'at no moment during my emigration did I relinquish the hope of coming back'.<sup>28</sup> Arendt's optimism is, I believe, discernible and becomes intelligible in the critical distance that can be identified between her and Heidegger both in regard to the 'interrogation of entities' within human history and at the level of fundamental ontology.

With regard to history, Heidegger had indicated in his lectures on Parmenides during the war and in his seminal post-war 'Letter on Humanism' first published in France in 1947, that there exist moments when events occur that make an imprint on humanity lasting for generations, for hundreds perhaps even thousands of years. He identified three such epoch-shaping moments in the 'deep history', *Geschichte*, of Western thinking to date.<sup>29</sup> The first was when the Romans appropriated ancient Greek language and ideas substituting for an earlier pre-reflective experience of Being as 'unconcealment',<sup>30</sup> a robust and controlling Latin orientation towards reality. The

28 Theodor Adorno cited in Patke, Rajeev, 'Walter Benjamin: the Intellectual in a Straw Hat', a paper presented at a Workshop on the 'Role of Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century', 18 August 1998, University of Haifa, Israel. (6<sup>th</sup> ISSEI Conference) Source: [http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellpatke/Benjamin/benjamin\\_intellectual.htm](http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellpatke/Benjamin/benjamin_intellectual.htm) (Accessed 3 March 2010).

29 Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, translated by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). For a discussion of 'deep history' in Heidegger's work see Timothy Clark, *Martin Heidegger* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002).

30 See, for example, Martin Heidegger's discussion of *alētheia* in, 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking' in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, edited by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

second shift occurred with the coming of Christianity and the third, when ‘*Ratio* and reason’, traceable to ‘the Roman re-interpretation of the Greek experience’ that ‘contribut[ed] to the forgetting of Being [became] dominating concepts’ employed by seventeenth century philosophers like Leibniz.<sup>31</sup> What accounted, at least in part, for the widening of the intellectual gulf between Arendt and Heidegger was, I think, the fact that his judgements concerning the reverberations of deep historical events made no concession to the gravity and impact of the *Shoah*. Indeed, Heidegger gave no indication at all that he too believed that the unprecedented suffering of the victims of totalitarianism represented something new in Western history, something never before witnessed. He gave no indication that he thought the abomination of the *Shoah*, ‘the great insanity of the third Germany’ as Primo Levi described it, was, like Being, beyond our conventional, our *traditional* methods of understanding.<sup>32</sup> So, when he referred to the gas chambers and to the extermination camps (which was exceptionally rarely) he appears not to have considered it to be understating matters to have discussed them in the same terms as the mechanisation by which modern agriculture had been transformed into a ‘food-industry’, for example.<sup>33</sup>

For Arendt, on the other hand, the emergence of totalitarian government marked, as already noted above, a point of no return with respect to the way in which we try to address the question of the meaning of being; it represented nothing less than the rupturing of tradition, ‘perhaps the most profound crisis in Western history since the downfall of the Roman Empire’.<sup>34</sup> Arendt not only regarded the suffering of the

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31 Heidegger, *Parmenides*, 69.

32 ‘The great insanity’ is Primo Levi’s expression. See his, *If This is a Man*, translated by Stuart Woolf (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1979). For a discussion of the limitations discussing the *Shoah* presents see Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

33 Martin Heidegger cited in Thomas Sheehan, ‘Heidegger and the Nazis’ in *The New York Review of Books*, XXXV, 10 (16 June, 1988): 42.

34 Arendt, *OT*, 9.

victims of totalitarianism as indeed something unprecedented in its brutality but she also, controversially, traced the routes by which totalitarian regimes had emerged to ‘a *subterranean* stream of European history’.<sup>35</sup> The impression on the Western psyche thus made by totalitarianism, for her, appears to have thrown into question the whole Heideggerian framework of *Geschichte*. Her writing suggests that there was now surely an undeniable case to be made for revising this framework in order to acknowledge the magnitude of the totalitarian phenomenon and to include what amounted to the profoundly disturbing ‘idea of a change in what it is *to be*’ that totalitarianism represented. After all, in Arendt’s estimation, this new departure was certain to preoccupy the European intellect for generations to come.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps of even greater significance than Arendt’s judgements, contra Heidegger, on the subject of totalitarianism was, however, the critical distance that opened up between them in respect of the “*positive*” possibilities, as it were, of *being-with-others*. Their differences in this respect effectively account for the very different directions in which their respective philosophies gravitated. They reflect their attitudes toward both the ancient Greek polis and mass society, for example, and they disclose too, why Arendt became a champion of politics and a defender of public discourse.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger had opened his ‘Exposition of the Task of a Preparatory Analysis of Dasein’, with the observation that ‘We are ourselves the entities to be

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>36</sup> See Robert Eaglestone, ‘The “Subterranean Stream of Western History”: Arendt and Levinas after Heidegger’ in Richard King and Dan Stone (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Genocide* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 208.

analysed'.<sup>37</sup> At least part of what this implied involved Heidegger providing an *environmental* account, as it were, of the qualitatively distinct "locales" that Dasein can be found occupying as a 'being-in-the-world'. In other words, Heidegger wanted to consider the 'spatiality' of Dasein, the type of settings that it continuously finds itself in depending upon the sort of activities in which it is engaged or the type of amenities it is seeking employ. Indeed, as he stated in *Being and Time*, 'Dasein's own spatiality is essential to its basic state of Being-in-the-world'.<sup>38</sup> So, for example, he noted that 'What we encounter as closest to us [...] is the room; and we encounter it not as something "between four walls" in a geometrical spatial sense, but as *equipment* for residing'.<sup>39</sup> The thrust of Hannah Arendt's Heideggerian critique of Heidegger seems, to me, to have been this: notwithstanding the philosopher's objective to provide a rich analysis of qualitatively differentiated "places" that Dasein could be observed occupying he had, nevertheless, neglected to identify what was surely the unquestionable import of *public* space as an ontologically fundamental human locale. In this regard his eulogizing the ancient Greeks, for example, for holding the key to the recovery of Being was myopic and *unimaginative*, because according to Arendt's political philosophy, he had simply failed to identify the full significance of what it meant to live in a polis.

Indeed, Heidegger warned against the corrupting influence of public life. In his post-war 'Letter on Humanism', for instance, he implied that 'the seductions of the public realm' be as much resisted as 'the impotence of the private'.<sup>40</sup> This echoed his earlier condemnation of 'publicness' in *Being and Time* where he denounced it for obscuring

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37 Heidegger, *BT*, 67.

38 Ibid., 148.

39 Ibid., 98. Emphasis added.

40 Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', 199.

everything.<sup>41</sup> What was the essence of Heidegger's critique of 'publicness'? The answer to this question is that he recognised the public realm to be home to *das Man*, 'the "they"'. And *das Man*, he believed, 'prescribes' everything from the way 'we take pleasure and enjoy ourselves' to the way we 'judge [...] literature and art' or even react with shock to something.<sup>42</sup> The picture of *Das Man* depicted by Heidegger is one of 'averageness, and levelling down'. 'Publicness [...] controls every way in which the world and Dasein get interpreted, and it is always right' not because it is intrinsically astute but rather, for the very opposite reason: 'because it is insensitive to every difference of level and of genuineness and thus never gets to the "heart of the matter"'.<sup>43</sup> In other words, Heidegger's judgement about 'publicness' seems to have been that it entailed one's individual *experience* itself being put at stake. Loss of experience was a theme taken up by many thinkers before Heidegger and it is an issue which has certainly preoccupied thinkers since.<sup>44</sup>

Loss of experience was something that worried Hannah Arendt too. However, one extended extract from *The Human Condition* suffices to make the point that, in contrast to Heidegger, she thought very differently indeed on the matter of public life:

To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an "objective" relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself.<sup>45</sup>

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41 Heidegger, *BT*, 165.

42 Ibid., 164.

43 Ibid., 165.

44 See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, 'Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience', in Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 2007).

45 Arendt, *HC*, 58.

Compunction is as much at work here as moral indignation is in Heidegger's observations on *das Man*. It is morally wrong, Arendt implies, *inhuman* no less, to live just a quiet private existence – though this is not to suggest this was Heidegger's position; it is life affirming to engage with others, to be seen in public. However, the overriding message of her post-war writings was, of course, an ontologically guaranteed political one, albeit a message conveyed by a messenger who trawled through the historical debris of a ruined tradition (again, echos of Walter Benjamin can be heard) only to salvage from it what could be used to reconstitute a lost understanding of politics. This she did by drawing sharp distinctions between what was, in a sense to be defined, *authentically* political as against other types of activity. Ultimately, for Arendt unlike Heidegger, public life was actually the seat of human experience. She looked to the ancient Greeks for illumination just as much as he did but, where she differed from him was in noticing something he had failed to see: the possibility of leading a public life that was not distinguishable by virtue of being 'average' but was rather, a life promising richness of experience and the possibility of genuine understanding.

The reorientation of our thinking that Hannah Arendt's mature political writings attempted to achieve was not though, purely a reaction to the European phenomenon of totalitarianism that spread across that continent during the nineteen thirties and throughout the nineteen forties ending only in the early nineteen fifties, according to her, with the death of Stalin. A citizen of the United States of America, to which she had fled from occupied France in 1941, Arendt, like Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and many other émigrés, experienced the repulsiveness of mass society and the

dominance of public opinion at first hand. Indeed, entering the fray over Little Rock in the early 1960s, Arendt was again witness to the iniquities of human behaviour which, a lot of the time, lay only just below the surface of social decorum. She believed that mass society recreated the sort of conditions that had grown out of totalitarian movements to become one of the defining features of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Mass society effectively produced human beings who could, at one and the same time, be with one another but not in any sense as a plurality. The loneliness of men and women in modern Western democracies seemed to mimic the desperate isolation concentration camp inmates were made to endure. Arendt was conscious, for example, of Riesman's important study, *The Lonely Crowd*, which she referred to in footnote in *The Human Condition*.<sup>46</sup> And, like those humiliated individuals she described in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, whose unquestioning *loyalty* to the Leader and to the Leader's every pronouncement was voiced afresh each time they were fortunate enough to avoid being victims of his sweeping purges, so 'society', Arendt wrote, 'always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest'.<sup>47</sup> It is testament to her optimism though, and this brings me back to a point already made above, that Arendt believed things could be different, that, as in the polis, it was possible for men to leave behind what Heidegger described as their 'averageness' and their 'everydayness', *to be* with their fellows in public in precisely conditions of freedom, equality and plurality.<sup>48</sup>

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46 David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denny, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, abridged and revised edition (London: Yale University Press, 2001). For Arendt's citation see HC, 59.

47 Arendt, HC, 39.

48 Heidegger, BT, 149 and 169.

In contrast to Arendt, who recovered from ancient Greek experience a model of being with one's fellow men that might serve to counter the excesses of isolation within contemporary mass society, Heidegger's denouncement of 'publicness' seems to have been restricted to a vision determined by *das Man* beyond which he simply could not see. Where she recognised the import of Aristotelian civic friendship and the possibilities it suggested for articulating the meaning of contemporary experience, he could see only the impression of *the "they"* on every everyday judgement made by Dasein, hence, Arendt's highly critical remarks directed at Heidegger in her 1946 paper on 'Existenz Philosophy' from which the epigraph at the head of this chapter is taken. Without public *discourse* between those occupiers of the political realm, a dialogue very different to the 'idle talk' Heidegger put into the mouths of those comprising *das Man*, Arendt believed there could, in fact, be no thinking at all.<sup>49</sup> In this she demonstrated her agreement with Kant who had pointed out two centuries earlier, that thinking, of course, *depends* upon the presence of others between whom thoughts are communicated.<sup>50</sup> So, Existenz cannot exist in isolation. Yet, '[t]he most essential characteristic of [Heidegger's] Self', it seemed to Arendt, 'is its absolute egoism, its radical separation from all its fellows'.<sup>51</sup> Existentially, this was simply not defensible, the implication being that the picture of Dasein painted by Heidegger was simplistic and flawed.

If, in regard to being with others, Heidegger could see no further than the shadows *the "they"* cast across everyday judgements, Arendt traced the critical distance crucial to

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49 Ibid., 212.

50 See Immanuel Kant, 'What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' in *Religion and Rational Theology* (hereafter *RRT*), translated & edited by Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16. Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *RRT*.

51 Arendt, 'What is Existenz Philosophy', 50.



making worldly events intelligible to the public space occupied by the ‘spectator’.<sup>52</sup> Lodged in the gap between past and future it was here in the political realm, she thought, that the spectator was *free* to ask *genuine* questions marking him out as one who rises above what Heidegger labelled mere ‘curiosity’.<sup>53</sup> In one sense there was actually an echo in this of Heidegger’s post-war teaching and publications in that at the very outset of the ‘Letter on Humanism’ he indicated that it was not action that paved the way to *Sein* but language: ‘Language is the House of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home’.<sup>54</sup> What the later Arendt argued seemed to acknowledge something important in this: it was not, in fact, men of action, revolutionaries for instance, who were regarded as being crucial to illuminating the meaning of political events but those onlookers who could judge actions from a critical distance. Enactment, conditional upon the deed springing out of an unfettered resolve, an unrestrained commitment, seemed to be giving way to thought. For Arendt, it was the ‘third party’ in whom she came to recognise the key to achieving intelligibility and understanding.<sup>55</sup> This spectator (again she was indebted to Kant in this respect), is indispensable. It is he, we might describe him as the public intellectual – an exile camped on the margins of society – and he alone who, from the critical distance of his unique perspective on events, is able to bring clarity of thought to bear upon them where the actors themselves are simply too close to what is happening to offer anything more than an account of their direct experiences.<sup>56</sup>

52 See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* edited by Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

53 Heidegger, *BT*, 216.

54 Heidegger, *BW*, 193.

55 ‘The third party’ was an expression Hannah Arendt used in her commentary on Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. See Hannah Arendt and Günther Stern, ‘Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*’ in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, edited by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 18. Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *RLC*.

56 See, for example, Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

It was, additionally though, the condition of being *released* from the worries of *everydayness*, released as far as Hannah Arendt was concerned, from constraining preoccupation with administrative issues or matters of health, welfare or sheer survival, that essentially *freed* the spectator to make his or her judgements about the *political* significance of events. In this sense, Arendt only reinforced the critical distance between her and Heidegger because she made her case by drawing distinctions between private, social and political spheres of activity that he, again, had failed to notice. If language, for Heidegger, constituted ‘the house of Being’, it was, for Hannah Arendt, only in the political discourse conducted within the public realm that understanding could *reside*. Had she though, in adopting this position simply come to expect too much of politics and had she burdened the public intellectual with responsibilities which it would be impossible for him, or her, to live up to?

Heidegger’s examples of Dasein’s relationship to the world of entities with which it is in continual daily contact, it must be remembered, were predominantly of a *practical* nature. They involved vehicles like cars or tools such as hammers, for instance. Such ‘ready-to-hand’ pieces of equipment as Heidegger described them,<sup>57</sup> were the very tools we might expect to be employed by Arendt’s labourers and workers about whom she wrote in *The Human Condition*. The point about her public realm was, however, its characterisation by, what we might describe as, “being-with-others-*without*-equipment” free, that is, of any need to be concerned with matters relating to practicality. The political realm was, in essence, a sphere of *non*-practicality. Herein lies a problem: in describing things his way, what Heidegger had demonstrated was

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<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Heidegger, *BT*, 109.

his remove from what he regarded as the fraudulent Platonic suggestion that *pure* perception is achievable. Plato's 'fictive agent of cognition', as George Steiner has described him, was 'detached from common experience'; Dasein's *immersion* in the 'quotidian matter and matter-of-factness of the world', its rootedness in everyday practicality represented precisely a rebuttal of the Platonic guarantee.<sup>58</sup> Was Hannah Arendt, despite her similar intention to distance herself from Plato, perhaps more Platonic than she would like to have admitted?

In some respects the conflict between her and Heidegger turns out to be no real conflict at all: he, after all was concerned with fundamental ontology, the interrogation of entities, access to and unconcealment of Being; she meanwhile, believed she had revealed the ontological structure of the human condition and sought thereupon to make human experience in general and the experience of the *Shoah* and totalitarian government in particular intelligible, communicable. Yet, there is I think, a question still for Arendt to answer cast into relief as the critical distance between her and Heidegger opened up, and it is this: does the seclusion of the Arendtian political sphere in which the spectator-judges close their ears, as she implied they should, to the daily buzz of the human swarm only demonstrate a degree of dispassionate separation from the everyday world that cannot, in fact, yield genuine understanding? Was her 'new concept of humanity',<sup>59</sup> which was conditional upon a reconstituted and coppiced public discourse, in actuality, little more than a phantom?

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58 George Steiner, *Heidegger* (Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks, 1978), 81. Heidegger, *BT*, 109.

59 See footnote 1 above.

## Chapter 1

### Experience and Others

*Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.*

Immanuel Kant<sup>60</sup>

*[...] like somebody divinely absent-minded and sunk in his own thoughts who, the twelve strokes of midday having just boomed into his ears, wakes with a start and wonders 'What hour struck?', sometimes we, too, afterwards rub our ears and ask, astonished, taken aback, 'What did we actually experience then?' or even, 'Who are we in fact?' and afterwards, as I said, we count all twelve reverberating strokes of our experience, of our life, of our being – oh! and lose count.*

Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>61</sup>

*[...] my assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings.*

Hannah Arendt<sup>62</sup>

Between the mid-1950s and the late 1960s Hannah Arendt prepared her notes for three lecture courses each entitled 'Political Experiences in the Twentieth Century'. Her outlines for these courses, which now form part of the archive collections at the New School for Social Research and the Library of Congress, much like her published writings – journal articles, books, essays and critical reviews – are littered with comments, observations and judgements relating to human experience of one sort or another.<sup>63</sup> In, for example, the earliest of these, her doctoral dissertation on Saint Augustine's treatment of love (1929), Arendt can typically be found discussing the pious believer's experience of isolation before God or musing upon the Christian's

60 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1933), A51/B75. Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *CPR*. The convention of in-text referencing according to the first and second editions of the *CPR* will be followed. The first edition will be designated 'A', the second 'B'.

61 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson and translated by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3. Emphases in original.

62 Arendt, *BPF*, 14.

63 Hannah Arendt's lecture notes were amongst other materials I viewed during a research trip to the Hannah Arendt Centre in the Fogelman Library at New School for Social Research in New York, between 10 and 16 July, 2009.

explicit experience of the past as sin.<sup>64</sup> In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* written a little over two decades later and published in 1951, by which time she had become more politically focused, she can be found commenting upon the changing fortunes of Prussia's wealthy and educated Jews, who, she suggested, experienced life, at least prior to 1807, as 'exceptions' to the mass of German Jews inhabiting Prussia's eastern territories. Ten years further on still, in the 'Preface' to her wide ranging collection of essays entitled, *Between Past and Future* published in 1961, Arendt's attention turned to the now 'weightless irrelevance' she said that was felt by former members of the Résistance who, in post-war Europe, had returned to 'a private life centred about nothing but itself', by which she meant a life absorbed purely with their own 'personal affairs'.<sup>65</sup> These daring individuals, she remarked 'had lost their treasure' – their erstwhile *experience* of 'public happiness'.<sup>66</sup> As Arendt remarked in that same preface, thinking itself seems to depend upon 'incidents of *living* experience'; it is out of experience, she believed, that we derive the reference points from which we learn to manage our way in the world.<sup>67</sup> Hence, the peculiarly American complexion of 'civil disobedience', which, she judged, despite having become a universally recognised phenomenon could only properly be 'cope[d] with' in America itself because essentially it was 'in accordance with the *spirit* of its [America's] laws' derivable from 'the extraordinary experiences of the early colonists'.<sup>68</sup>

In and of itself, the emphasis placed upon experience should perhaps not strike us as exceptional in a writer considered to be a political philosopher, though Arendt herself

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<sup>64</sup> Arendt, *LSA*.

<sup>65</sup> Arendt, *BPF*, 3

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>67</sup> See footnote 62. Emphasis added.

<sup>68</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Civil Disobedience' in *Crises of the Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 67. Emphasis in original.

rejected this description of her. Where her analyses begin to have more of a provocative edge though, is at those points where she wrote about experience in what appears, at least on the face of it, to be *computational* terms. For example, in one respect, she argued that if we consider experience two or three hundred years ago, say, in relation to our own times, then it can be seen to have diminished – quite significantly, in fact: ‘If we compare the modern world with that of the past’, she stated in *The Human Condition* (1958), ‘the loss of human experience involved in this development is extraordinarily striking’.<sup>69</sup> This was more of an arresting claim to have made. The expression ‘modern’ had, since around the fifth century, denoted a shift in consciousness between epochs and until the French Revolution tended to indicate renewed relations to the ancients.<sup>70</sup> Post Enlightenment however, the term began to be used to suggest the *superiority* of all that was contemporary over what had gone before. Here, Arendt was talking of modernity in a critical fashion. The modern world was somehow falling short in terms of experience, quite noticeably, in fact, compared with previous generations. One problem with Arendt’s claim, however, is her vagueness in providing us with a detailed chronology of the alleged decline.

On the other hand, Arendt was under no illusion that the twentieth century had exposed men to utterly new and previously unimaginable experiences, of which the horrors undergone by victims of the Nazi concentration and death camps and the Soviet Gulags can be cited as among the most disturbing examples. Such indeed, was the magnitude, the sheer *otherness*, of the abominations the victims of these descents into barbarism had been subjected to that their experiences, she judged, had exploded our legal, moral, and philosophical certainties, resisting articulation by way of

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69 Arendt, *HC*, 321.

70 Jürgen Habermas, ‘Modernity versus Postmodernity’ in *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 3–14.

accepted conceptual frameworks and intellectual categories. There were echos in what Arendt wrote of the dismay Walter Benjamin felt following the First World War:

never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences, by the ruling powers. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its centre, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny fragile human body.<sup>71</sup>

For Hannah Arendt what had changed, I think, as a result of the appearance of totalitarianism was our *self*-certainty about what it means to be and, in particular, what it means to be with others, a question that had preoccupied her as far back as her doctoral dissertation. Totalitarianism marked a paradigm shift in our experience of such matters.

There is, of course, a problem, an apparent contradiction with all this. If we were to interpret Arendt's remarks literally in terms of the cold calculation they seem to imply, using a type of balance sheet for recording human experience on which apparent losses could be "offset" against what appear to be apparent gains, then we would surely have to ask, do the "gains" she drew attention to outweigh the "losses", or did she think it was vice versa? Put crudely, has there been a net profit or a net loss of experience over the generations? To be clear, this would be to inquire whether, somewhat insensitively given their egregious nature, the additions to human experience represented by the unprecedented displays of wickedness the victims of totalitarianism had to suffer could be measured against the losses Arendt believed she

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<sup>71</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', cited in Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (London: University of California Press, 2005), 330.

had identified when contrasting the modern world with the past. We have though, no means of actually computing the relative weight of these so called gains in relation to the so called losses. Indeed, how could such an unsympathetic and purely clinical utilitarian calculation ever be realised on a ledger of human experience?

Fortunately, we are spared from the necessity of having to engage in such cold-hearted profit and loss accounting because Arendt was not suggesting gains and losses in *real* terms. Actually, her reflections represent two sides of one and the same coin, which concerns the *intelligibility* of experience. Her point was, I think, that she judged experience to have atrophied in the sense that we are *at a loss*, though we are not necessarily conscious of it, as to how to discriminate properly between distinct modes of experience. We are no longer cognisant about the nature of what is fundamentally *human* experience. For instance, she came to believe that we had lost the ability to distinguish *political* activity, undeniably crucial to what it means to be human, from activities that involved say, labour intensive practical tasks which, vital as they might be to the continued survival of human beings on earth are, nonetheless, surely undeserving of the public prominence they have come to enjoy. The results of our inability to draw this type of distinction, are quite clear, Arendt would argue from the late nineteen fifties onwards, if we only stop to think about the way that modern politics is now dominated by economic and commercial interests and by practicality, by what amounts to the demands of the appetites and the urge purely to survive. Politics, she seems to have concluded, associated now with little more than the art of the possible, has come to stand for the working out of solutions to administrative, economic and social welfare problems.



Being at a loss in regard to how to make distinctions has an additionally disturbing consequence, though. Arendt judged that it has struck us mute in the wake of totalitarianism, left us noticeably inarticulate about the significance of what the Nazi state represented between the mid-1930s and 1945 and likewise the Stalinist state represented to no lesser degree between 1930 and 1953. We are even left with self doubt about the reality of the crimes that were committed. Nazism and Stalinism, she judged, were the two most prominent examples of a previously unseen type of terror-based government the logic of which *par excellence* was the utter liquidation of action. In other words, what totalitarianism represented was the complete *antithesis* of all that the concept ‘political’ stands for. Yet, how do we articulate this? Could even those who came through the horrors be certain about what they had suffered? She observed:

There are numerous reports by survivors. The more authentic they are, the less they attempt to communicate things that evade human understanding and human experience – sufferings, that is, that transform men into “uncomplaining animals”. None of these reports inspires those passions of outrage and sympathy through which men have always been mobilised for justice. On the contrary, anyone speaking or writing about concentration camps is still regarded as suspect; and if the speaker has resolutely returned to the world of the living, he himself is often assailed by doubts with regard to his own truthfulness, as though he had mistaken a nightmare for reality.<sup>72</sup>

For Arendt though, it was precisely her own first-hand experience of having witnessed government of this anti-political nature that led her, in the years following the Second World War, to reflect on what had taken place. In the aftermath of the destruction she asked, what is it that politics actually requires and what does it mean for people to live with one another as a political community?

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72 Arendt, *OT*, 439.

Still we are left with questions: what exactly does our loss of experience amount to? To what did Arendt attribute our impoverishment? And, how, if at all, can experience be recovered? These questions might be summarised by asking whether the crisis is something we can understand in historical terms, something over which we have some control suggesting a possible solution if only our present circumstances could be altered, or whether our loss of experience amounts rather to something *transhistorical* as it were, an ontologically fundamental ‘absence’ not a real historical loss at all.<sup>73</sup> Arendt, as I will show, thought it was both: a fundamental absence that could, nevertheless, be put right. There were echoes of Rilke, of course, in the problem she was articulating: ‘Each torpid turn of the world has such disinherited children [...]’. There were reverberations too, of Hofmannsthal’s letter to Lord Chandos: ‘In short my condition is this: I have quite lost the faculty to think or speak on any subject in a coherent fashion’.<sup>74</sup> And, the connection with Walter Benjamin already intimated, I am thinking here of his essays on experience as well as his discussions of colour and the loss of the purity of language, for example, is undeniably crucial.<sup>75</sup> What grounds though, did Arendt have for thinking that human experience had become unintelligible, that we have developed blind spots in this regard, as it were? Certainly she was not alone in expressing her anxiety. It was shared by a significant number of other, mainly German-speaking thinkers and writers ranging from Martin Buber to Walter Benjamin, Robert Musil and Theodor Adorno,

73 See Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

74 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, translated by J. B. Leishman & Stephen Spender (London: The Hogarth Press, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1963), 7<sup>th</sup> Elegy. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter*, translated by Michael Hofmann (London: Syrens, 1995), 9. See also, Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

75 Walter Benjamin, ‘Experience’, ‘A Child’s View of Color’ and ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ in *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, 1913–1926, translated by Rodney Livingstone and others, and edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).

but including as well the British political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, for instance, and the American pragmatist John Dewey, to cite but a few twentieth-century examples of those who were perturbed by what they saw, too, as deplorable circumstances. Today, Giorgio Agamben, one of Benjamin's most sympathetic interpreters, has articulated similar concerns afresh. His 'Infancy and History', for example, is subtitled, 'An Essay on the Destruction of Experience'.<sup>76</sup>

Walter Benjamin, who Arendt and her first husband, Günther Stern, knew as a fellow émigré in Paris from 1933 to early 1940, discussed the deterioration of experience from his earliest writings on colour and on language and he went on to develop his ideas in both historical and political respects, formulating a critique of the concept of progress, for example, which became part of his broader philosophy of history.<sup>77</sup> From his very earliest writings it was evident that there was an intense messianic and redemptive aspect to Benjamin's discussion, though as his thinking developed a tension grew between this early position and his later attraction to historical materialism, a tension that he was never quite able to resolve. What is clear though, is that for Benjamin the loss of experience amounted to the loss of something spiritual, something innocent, pure, and prelapsarian, something that could only, it seemed, now be glimpsed through astrological and graphological ciphers, for instance. In his early work, the nature of the experience he had identified, he thought, was still observable in children:

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<sup>76</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience' in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (London: Verso, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Arendt and Stern had already met Benjamin in Berlin but had not known him well. In Paris they would attend his discussion circles. The last time they were in each other's company was in 1940 in Marseilles where Benji, as Arendt fondly referred to him, entrusted them with a number of manuscripts including his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' which he asked them to take to the Institute for Social Research in New York. See Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*. Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' is collected in, *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (Bungay, Suffolk: Fontana/Collins), 1973: 255–266.

children see with pure eyes, without allowing themselves to be emotionally disconcerted, it is something spiritual: the rainbow refers not to a chaste abstraction but to a life in art. The order of art is paradisiacal because there is no thought of the dissolution of boundaries – from excitement – in the object of experience. Instead the world is full of colour in a state of identity, innocence and harmony. Children are not ashamed, since they do not reflect but only see.<sup>78</sup>

Benjamin would go on to present his arguments about experience in a variety of registers, linguistic, for instance, historical and aesthetic. I will have recourse to return to them at various points if only as a foil to clarify Hannah Arendt's own position, which I would contend, though clearly indebted to Benjamin in many respects was at the same time quite distinct.

An example of where Benjamin and Arendt agreed was in distancing their more positive observations about the nature of experience from the model of the natural sciences. For each of them, experience was not something to be explained by establishing temporal causal relationships but rather it pointed to something communicable as a result of the illumination across time of similarities. Benjamin referred, for example, recalling Baudelaire's search for *correspondences*, to 'inconceivable analogies and connections between events'.<sup>79</sup> Arendt meanwhile, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* would identify not causes and effects so much as 'elements that later *crystallized* in the novel totalitarian phenomenon'.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, both she and Benjamin detected in the decay of experience something savage and dangerous, for her indeed, something *banally* evil, an oxymoron employed to suggest that at the level of culture and society something was gravely amiss. Yet, unlike

78 Benjamin, 'A Child's View of Color', 51.

79 Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism' in *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, 211.

80 Arendt, *OT*, xv. Emphasis added.

Theodor Adorno who was also persuaded by Benjamin's anxieties about experience and perturbed too by what he labelled the industrialisation of culture, Arendt was never tempted to frame her arguments in messianic terms.<sup>81</sup> There was no redemptive aspect to her discussion of genuine experience as there was at the conclusion of *Minima Moralia*, for example, where Adorno ended with a plea to see the world 'from the standpoint of redemption'.<sup>82</sup> Arendt, in contrast, was neither attracted by the promise of a return to a time of innocence or absolute experience, nor was she persuaded by the intimation of harmonious reconciliation in an Arcadian future, the revival of an 'integrated totality of experience denied by the modern world'.<sup>83</sup> Instead of the radical solutions typical of Benjamin's later writings, the 'apocalypse that would bring about the redemption of culture, liberating language from platitude and instrumentalization', Arendt would gesture instead towards a more modest politics characterised by something approaching the relative gentility of Aristotelian civic friendship and public happiness.<sup>84</sup>

The apparent modesty of Arendt's stance, the proposal to do no more than 'to think', above all, 'what we are doing', set her apart not only from Benjamin but from the *radical* sensitivities displayed by a variety of Jewish messianic thinkers during the period from the *fin de siècle* to the 1930s.<sup>85</sup> Amongst these thinkers were, for instance, Gustav Landauer, Ernst Bloch, Franz Rosenzweig and Georg Lukács whose positions were formulated by the fusion, the '*elective affinity*', between romantic utopian ideals

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81 See, for example, Theodor W Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited by M. J. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001).

82 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by E.F.N. Jephcott (London: NLB 1974), 247.

83 Jay, *Songs*, 316. Jay provides a wide-ranging account of different modes of experience prompted by Kant's transcendental method.

84 Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (London: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

85 Arendt, *HC*, 5.

and ‘restorative messianism’. In contrast, Arendt’s intentions were deceptively unassuming.<sup>86</sup> Anson Rabinbach summarises a widely shared attitude, which reflects, I think, her position too:

at the end of the Second World War Jünger and other German conservative intellectuals abandoned their revolutionary stance for a more muted critique of Americanism and the “West” as the purveyors of a globally technological nihilism. [Their] abstract thinking about the apocalypse might be characterized as both “pre-postmodern” and antiredemptive. To put it in a convenient formula, World War I gave rise to reflections on death and transfiguration, World War II to reflections on evil, or on how the logic of modernity since the Enlightenment, with its legacy of progress, secularism, and rationalism could not be exculpated from events that seemed to violate its ideals.<sup>87</sup>

I shall return to the relative “modesty” of Arendt’s political philosophy shortly. Before going any further though, I think that the details of the Kantian roots of the crisis of experience, the origins of its alleged decay and the conditions for its possible retrieval, are worth unearthing. As Martin Jay has insightfully demonstrated, experience plays a significant part in the writings of many cultural critics, philosophers and political theorists, for example, each of whom has responded to Kant in a different, unique and frequently challenging manner.<sup>88</sup> In Arendt’s case her adoption and existential adaptation of crucial Kantian principles is, I think, quite fundamental to understanding why the loss of experience was such a significant, if surprisingly little commented upon, aspect of her work.

In *Songs of Experience* Jay evaluates a number of different, sometimes radically different, melodies pointing to the fact that the reality which experience indicates is

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<sup>86</sup> Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe* (London: The Athlone Press, 1992).

<sup>87</sup> Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe*, 9.

<sup>88</sup> See footnote 71 above.

fugitive. He acknowledges that experience has been explained in terms of religious, aesthetic, historical and political modalities by a wide variety of thinkers. His starting point on each occasion though, is Immanuel Kant because following its appearance in the eighteenth century Kant's Critical philosophy ignited a string of touchpapers brandished by those who strenuously opposed what they interpreted as 'the reduction of experience to a question of cognition'.<sup>89</sup> Herein lies the clue that in talking about 'experience' we are not referring purely to the fact that on a daily basis each and every one of us is exposed to an innumerable array, a 'manifold' in Kantian terminology, of personal happenings or occurrences – immediate psychological experiences (*Erlebnisse*), as it were. This, in itself, would be an unexceptional observation about our being. Rather, the point about the degree of significance that has been attached to experience by so many thinkers, including Arendt, and denigrated by just as many others, concerns the weight that can, with confidence, be attributed to it as a means of disclosing something *vital* about human life on earth, something pre-analytic, an affective dimension. Experience in this sense is characterised by being irreducibly non-rational, in fact, non-identifiable and immeasurable using the tools of scientific observation though more than purely a matter of individual mood and sentiment. It was, I think, as a result of her reworking of Kant that Hannah Arendt developed a *political* voice and was able to express a number of her own insights about how to retrieve lost experience. It is these insights, I believe, that ultimately suggest a provocative, if unstated *critique of historical judgement* generally, in terms, that is, of what Heidegger recognised as '*Historie*', and certainly they are at the root, more particularly, of her differences with him in respect of his ideas about the unfolding of *Geschichte*, or 'deep history'.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 78.

In his epistemological writings, most notably in the *Critique of Pure Reason* published in 1781, Kant's objective had been to restore confidence in the possibility of certain scientific knowledge and he was adamant that experience had to be the starting point for any such certainty: 'For how should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action', he asked, 'did not objects affecting our senses [...] arouse the activity of our understanding?' (B1). However, though experience was for Kant the obvious place to begin in order to underwrite the results of science, and, as Jay points out, represented what Kant described as a '*résumé*' of the entire first *Critique*, its author did not believe that knowledge actually ensued from experience alone: '[...] though all our knowledge begins with experience', Kant asserted, 'it does not follow that it all arises out of experience' (B1). In moving beyond both the fallacies of purely deductive reasoning as well as Hume's inductive or associationist empiricism, Kant made the intelligibility of the idea of knowledge conditional upon a partnership in respect of which the individual became the ground for the necessary *intellectual* mediation of sensible intuitions, that is, he became the ground for a required mental *interpretation* of the manifold of sense impressions he received. The result was not knowledge in itself but an epistemology traceable to a transcendental unity of apperception, that is, associated with the singularity of a unified subject. The guarantee of all knowledge would be that it derived not from the passive reception of a manifold of sense impressions by a mind that was nothing but a *tabula rasa*, but, that it could only issue from impressions received by the senses and instantaneously *actively* interpreted by concepts and categories deduced to have been gifted to all rational beings.



In contrast to Kant's own estimate, I believe that a far more accurate summary, or 'résumé', of his epistemology is, in fact, captured by his, now much quoted observation that, '[t]houghts', by which he meant concepts, 'without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind' (A51/B75). This dictum will, indeed, be a very important part of my argument about Hannah Arendt's "critique of historical judgement". The observation expresses with almost lyrical concision the certitude that concepts alone, starved of experiential content, are as little able to form the basis of any certain knowledge, or indeed *cognition*, as are intuitions unmolested by the irritable drive to create order out of what would otherwise remain chaotic.<sup>90</sup> However, the assimilation of knowledge that Kant believed his transcendental method achieved was delivered at a price, because the range of what could now be described as *genuine* experience was reduced to those phenomena alone made intelligible through the transcendental capacity of the mind to subsume sense impressions under deduced concepts and categories. The nature of "things-in-themselves" could only be a matter of speculation. Indeed, the very notion of "things in themselves" now became meaningless, a nonsense. This was the logical consequence of Kant's transcendental method. The realm where such "things", 'noumena' as opposed to phenomena, might be imagined to "reside" would forever remain inaccessible to human cognition. Thus was born a divide that could not be straddled, a divide separating the unitary subject of apperception from the *original* object of experience. It was a divide that Benjamin, for example, in contrast to both Arendt and Adorno sought to dissolve by indicating what Jay refers to as a 'moment of equiprimordiality', a moment that is, when

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90 In the Cambridge University Press edition of the first *Critique*, the translation of part of the text at A50/B74, which almost immediately precedes Kant's dictum runs as follows: '[...] neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition'. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193.

experience is, somewhat incomprehensibly, no longer conditional upon the existence of the experiencing subject.<sup>91</sup>

Kant's transcendental method lead to what many perceived to be a 'cramped and limited reduction of experience to nothing but an epistemological function'.<sup>92</sup>

Benjamin, for one, dismissed Kantian experience because of its *vacancy*: '[t]he decisive mistakes of Kant's epistemology are, without a doubt, traceable to the hollowness of the experience available to him, and thus the double task of creating a new concept of knowledge and a new conception of the world on the basis of philosophy becomes a single one.'<sup>93</sup> In the same essay, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', he remarked further, '[i]ndeed, one can say that the very greatness of his [Kant's] work, his unique radicalism, presupposed an experience which had almost no intrinsic value and which could have attained its (we may say) sad significance only through its certainty.'<sup>94</sup> Similar discomfort provoked many of Kant's detractors to react by expressing views hostile to his critical philosophy on grounds that his methods left no room for what, beyond cognition, comprised essential, immediate and pre-reflective facets of experience. Their abhorrence for the system the Königsberg philosopher had built attested to their fear that what was indispensable to any full and proper appreciation of the rich qualitative potential of human life and the needs of human beings was being shunned. To cite just one of many possible critics, the young Martin Buber, in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, in an effort to breathe new life into German Jewry and revitalize its sense of *community*, called in his speeches for a return to the depths of inner lived

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91 Jay, *Songs*, 357.

92 Ibid., 76.

93 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' in *Selected Writings* Volume 1, 102.

94 Ibid., 101.

experience through which entry into a transcendent sacred reality could once again be achieved.<sup>95</sup> Like Benjamin, Buber deplored what he perceived to be a complete lack of immediacy and intensity in Kant's understanding of experience as *Erlebnis* (Buber would himself subsequently be criticised by Benjamin for his over enthusiasm about the First World War on precisely the grounds that it was too bound up with this type of experience) and certainly at this early point in his life he sought to oppose Kant's shallow, because purely epistemological, results in respect of phenomena by drawing attention to the virtues of rich experience – rich in that it was imagined to be both more primitive and more profound. Agamben, echoing Max Weber in 'Science as a Vocation', summarises the general consequences of Kantian epistemology thus:

Inasmuch as its goal was to advance the individual to maturity – that is, an anticipation of death as the idea of an achieved totality of experience – [experience] was something complete in itself, something it was possible to have, not only to undergo. But once experience was referred instead to the subject of science, which cannot reach maturity but can only increase its own knowledge, it becomes something incomplete, an “asymptotic” concept, as Kant will say, something it is possible only to *undergo*, never to *have*: nothing other, therefore, than the infinite process of knowledge.<sup>96</sup>

The tribute Walter Benjamin paid to the purity and innocence of the way in which children see colour constituted, to all intents and purposes, a repudiation of both the Kantian unitary subject as well as the imposition by this subject of intellectual categories upon the manifold of sensible intuitions. That is, this repudiation amounted to more than just the rejection of the limiting of experience to what could be known as a result of synthetic a priori judgements. There was in his critique an even more

<sup>95</sup> Asher D. Biemann (ed.), *The Martin Buber Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

<sup>96</sup> Agamben, 'Infancy', 23.

extreme position being adopted by Benjamin, one with far-reaching consequences, namely, the *disappearance* of the subject altogether. Howard Caygill, in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, has described just how ambitious and radical Benjamin's ideas were:

In this [Benjamin's] experience, two components of Kant's account – sensibility and the understanding – collapse into each other, and the experiencing subject which would contain them dissolves into experience. *The opposition between gaze and the gazed upon collapses*, both threatening a nihilistic dissolution into a pure featureless identity beyond subject and object but also promising a new articulation of experience.<sup>97</sup>

The demise of the subject, which to all intents and purposes dissolved the Kantian opposition 'between the gaze and the gazed upon' will be crucial, I think, when we come to consider Hannah Arendt's adoption and existential adaptation of some of the ideas I have thus far been discussing in relation to both Kant and Benjamin.

Notwithstanding the possibilities Benjamin's thought offered for re-articulating experience, Arendt's understanding of politics and what was required in order to make political experience intelligible and thus, all importantly, *communicable*, actually came to *rely upon* a distinction between the gaze of the *spectator* (who had originally appeared in Kant's 1790 discussion of aesthetics), and the conduct of the political actors upon whom the spectator's critical gaze happened to fix.<sup>98</sup> The *subject*, in other words, was fundamental to what would amount to an Arendtian political philosophy built upon both plurality and the interdependency of individuals. Hence her concern to challenge the limitations of Heidegger's thoughts about the meaning of *being-in-relation-to-others*, thoughts which seemed to be ensnared by his negative conception

<sup>97</sup> Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London: Routledge, 1997), 12. Emphasis added.

<sup>98</sup> See, Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1987).

of *das Man* beyond which he could not see. The other as *spectator* would, in Arendt's later writings in particular, come to play a crucial Kantian function, though now in terms of political rather than aesthetic experience.<sup>99</sup> The other as spectator, that is, would prove to be the very condition for making political judgements.

Arendt's observations about both Rahel Varnhagen and Adolf Eichmann are, I think, salient at this point.<sup>100</sup> Her assessment of Rahel seems to have been that much to her own distress Rahel simply allowed life to saturate her with the consequence that she spent most of it unhappily and unsuccessfully plotting to escape her circumstances, not least of which involved being a Jewess. It is as if Arendt concluded, Rahel was so overburdened by experience that she was simply unable to properly understand or make any sense of it. Despite writing her thoughts down in her now famous diaries and letters she simply could not achieve the critical distance demanded by understanding. Arendt noted:

Her whole effort was to expose herself to life so that it could strike her "like a storm without an umbrella." ("What am I doing? Nothing. I am letting life rain upon me.") She preferred not to use characteristics or opinions on persons she encountered, on the circumstances and conditions of the world, on life itself, for purposes of shelter.<sup>101</sup>

In Rahel's Berlin salon, there was certainly plenty of talk, indeed 'unbounded communication'. However, in Arendt's estimate the salon functioned as little more than a quaint and charming place where "'enlightened" aristocrats, middle-class intellectuals, and actors' could meet on equal terms, but in the end where 'nothing

99 See, for example, Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* edited by Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *LKPP*.

100 Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, edited by Liliane Weissberg and translated by Richard and Clara Winston (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).

101 Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, v.

really mattered but personality and the uniqueness of character, talent, and expression'.<sup>102</sup> Friedrich Gentz, the political publicist and diplomat, might rub shoulders with the banker Abraham Mendelssohn, Louis Ferdinand, a Hohenzollern prince, with the romantic writer Friedrich Schlegel, nevertheless, there was little prospect, Arendt concluded, for genuine communication, for objective selfless thinking, ultimately for *political* judgement. Though also subject to an 'unthinking absorption in everydayness'<sup>103</sup> Eichmann, on the other hand, did seek out shelter. However, he found it only by receding into the twisted ideological labyrinth of National Socialism that claimed to be able to explain and make sense of everything through the logic of race conflict. The further into this maze that Eichmann travelled though, the more *isolated* he became deprived also, though for different reasons to Rahel, of meaningful dialogue with others so much so, in Arendt's estimation, that he ended up losing all facility for language itself and thus all sense of the reality that is confirmed through genuine communication with one's equals.

I make these points only to emphasise that the unresolved Kantian tension between "subject" and "object" that Benjamin had attempted to short-circuit but that Hannah Arendt preserved was, in and of itself, no guarantee of experience as such. Experience, on an existential level, Arendt thought, could no more be the product of a purely raw engagement with events than epistemologically, as Kant had demonstrated, it could result from unmediated intuitions. In both instances something more was required. Existential experience requires the other. However, it requires the other not simply as a matter of proximity. Mass society was proof of that. It is the other's

*intellectual judgement* that is crucial, just as epistemologically sensible intuitions need

102 Arendt, *OT*, 59–60.

103 Michael Mack, 'The Holocaust and Hannah Arendt's Philosophical Critique of Philosophy: Eichmann in Jerusalem' in *New German Critique* 106, 36 (2009): 40.

to be mediated by concepts: 'Existenz itself is never essentially isolated'.<sup>104</sup> The other then, who effectively anchors Existenz (the being of man), has at least to fulfil this condition: she or he has to be capable of communicating. In other words, the other has to be capable of supplying intellectual analysis and this can only be achieved by both maintaining a critical distance from events and by applying the very critical discursive tools inevitably absent from those actually engaged in action itself.

Hannah Arendt was not alone in finding Benjamin's radical ideas about 'equiprimordiality' uninspiring. Theodor Adorno too, expressed deep-seated suspicions about Benjamin's "vanishing" subject.<sup>105</sup> He strove to preserve what he perceived to be a non-identity characterising the true relationship between subject and object. In 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin' Adorno couched his anxieties in the following terms:

Between myth and reconciliation, the poles of his [Benjamin's] philosophy, the subject evaporates. Before his Medusan glance, man turns into the stage on which an objective process unfolds. For this reason Benjamin's philosophy is no less a source of terror than a promise of happiness. [...] He reduces [...] autonomy to a moment of transition in a dialectical process, as with the tragic hero, and the reconciliation of men with the creation has as its condition the dissolution of all self-posed human existence.<sup>106</sup>

Yet in Benjamin's thought itself things were not so incontrovertibly black and white.

A fault line began to appear in his writings a decade or so before his premature death by suicide in 1940. This occurred as Benjamin noticed the possibilities historical materialism offered and he allowed it to play as important a role in shaping his ideas

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<sup>104</sup> See footnote 1 above.

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Theodor Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, edited by Rolf Tiedmann and translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

<sup>106</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin' in *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber London: (Neville Spearman, 1967), 235–236.

as, in an earlier mood, messianism had played. In contrast to *Erlebnis*, the more individual sense of experience that describes the immediacy of a personal psychological episode or incident, Benjamin now began to write about *Erfahrung*, a social-historical sense of experience as a cultural characteristic rooted in tradition. This was, in fact, a fundamental distinction explored, for example, by Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer amongst many others.<sup>107</sup> It had, perhaps, underpinned some of the anti-Semitic distrust of the Jews that had threatened the post-Enlightenment German-Jewish dialogue: just how German, truly German in terms of the depth of their immersion in social and historical institutions and traditions, were the Jews? Was theirs a culturally rich Germanness, deeply rooted? Or was it something far more superficial, individual and personal and thus, in social terms less convincing?<sup>108</sup> Criticising Bergson's concept of '*durée*', from which, Benjamin observed 'tradition is excluded', he contended, in an essay entitled 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire', that the French philosopher had, in effect, reduced all experience to that solely of *Erlebnis*: 'The *durée* has the miserable endlessness of a scroll. [...] It is the quintessence of a passing moment (*Erlebnis*) that struts about in the borrowed garb of experience [*Erfahrung*]'.<sup>109</sup>

By the 1930s Benjamin was focusing very much on historical and political issues. In doing so his earlier quest for the purity of absolute experience seemed now to be giving way to a much more worldly concept. This, I think, was something Hannah

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107 Dilthey, for example, in *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society* edited by H.P. Rickman (New York: Harper, 1962), focused on *Erlebnis* as a means of replacing the *objectivity* of the physical sciences when discussing human beings. Hans-Georg Gadamer meanwhile, in *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition and translation by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), is more critical of *Erlebnis* because of its romantic associations.

108 See George L. Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985) for a discussion of this dialogue.

109 Walter Benjamin, 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, translated by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), 145.



Arendt found very appealing. For example, in his 1933 essay ‘Experience and Poverty’ Benjamin wrote:

everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger sons. It was handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs; with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales, sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside. – Where has it all gone? Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story? Where do you still hear words from the dying that last, and that pass from one generation to the next like a precious ring? [...] And who will even attempt to deal with young people by giving them the benefit of their experience?<sup>110</sup>

Arendt’s discussion, twenty five years later in *The Human Condition*, of the importance of storytelling was surely a recollection and an acknowledgement of Benjamin’s regret. She quoted the Danish novelist, Isak Dinesen, for example, as having observed that, ‘All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them’.<sup>111</sup> There is a broader point that can be made here, however.

Though there was a shared linguistic theme in Benjamin’s discussion in ‘Experience and Poverty’ and, for instance, his much earlier essay entitled ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, written in 1916, the emphasis in the later writings was less about the failure of language to convey ‘cosmic affinities’ and more about human deficiency in regard to communicating ‘residues of past learning that [...] might be functional in the future’.<sup>112</sup> What Benjamin was pointing to was nothing less than damaged experience as a result of a *broken* tradition, which obstructed the passing of

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110 Walter Benjamin, ‘Experience and Poverty’ in *Selected Writings*, volume 2, part 2, 1931–1934, translated by Rodney Livingstone and others, and edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 731.

111 Arendt, *HC*, 175.

112 Jay, *Songs*, 330.

learning from one generation to the next. His task therefore, and it was one that I think Hannah Arendt adopted as her own after the Second World War, became that of trying to establish the grounds on which what was of most value in the historical record could be illuminated, made newly intelligible and re-articulated. This was precisely what Benjamin had set himself to achieve in *The Arcades Project*, for example, where, like a ‘rag picker’ he foraged amongst ‘the scattered fragments of genuine historical experience’ in search of lost treasure.<sup>113</sup> With the manifestation of totalitarianism and what Arendt referred to as ‘the end of tradition’<sup>114</sup> after the *Shoah*, she described the same task in terms of diving for pearls, the skill of the pearl diver being to ‘pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths’, in order to bring ‘them to the surface’.<sup>115</sup> There was something deceitful in this characterisation though, because whichever way one looked at it what was clear was that this was not going to be a straightforward or undemanding task: ““Our inheritance was left to us by no testament””, Arendt observed in *Between Past and Future*, quoting the poet René Char.<sup>116</sup> And, changing her metaphor to one somewhat less alluring than pearl diving, she warned, in the same collection of essays, that genuine connections between the past and the present moment had to be ‘discover[ed]’ afresh by ‘each new generation, indeed every new human being’ and then only as a result of ‘ploddingly’ hard work.<sup>117</sup>

All this raises the question of what actually constitutes “*genuine*” historical experience. In what precisely does the value of experience reside? And what are the

113 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* translated by H. Eiland, & K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). The quoted extract is from Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 144.

114 Arendt, *BPF*, 17.

115 Hannah Arendt, ‘Introduction’ to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt & translated by Harry Zohn (Bungay, Suffolk: Fontana/Collins, 1973), 50–51.

116 Arendt, *BPF*, 3.

117 *Ibid.*, 13.

forgotten treasures that lie buried in history? I will come back to these questions shortly. For the moment, I think, we at least have some provisional answers to the questions I posed earlier about what Arendt intended us to understand by the loss of experience. Though her concerns did not imitate the anti-capitalist critique of ‘progress’ that Benjamin would express in his later work, what they did suggest, I think, was the belief that the loss of experience entailed *absence* of the *other*, an absence that constituted a profound, in the sense of a fundamental, impact upon our ability to form political judgements. Kant thought it was epistemologically erroneous to argue that experience comprises of unmediated sense perceptions, something wrongly assumed in Hume’s empiricist philosophy. In a political as opposed to an epistemological context, Arendt thought we are equally mistaken in thinking experience is possible in the absence of our neighbour. She believed, that quite fundamentally this could not be so. In other words, the possibility of political experience in isolation from other people was just as unlikely as the possibility of cognitive experience resulting from Kantian intuitions divorced from concepts. ‘Experience’, as Benjamin observed, ‘is [...] a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life’.<sup>118</sup> It is something passed on from one generation to the next, indeed from one individual to the next. It follows then that the other is crucial to its transmission.

What then, of the *value* of historical experience? What makes certain fragments of historical experience more important, more ‘genuine’ as Benjamin put it, than others? To ask these questions in respect of Hannah Arendt’s writings, is, I think, to ask about the ontologically fundamental roots of experience she was addressing. The response

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118 Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 145.

has to be somewhat ambivalent, however, because there is an ambivalence lurking in Arendt's work. Or so it seems. For example, at times she wrote about political experience almost in nostalgic terms, that is, in terms which could be interpreted as expressing wistful affection for times past – the Greek polis, for example, as recalled in *The Human Condition* or the American Revolution in paying tribute to which Arendt acknowledged a debt of gratitude to the country that had taken her in together with so many other refugees fleeing the Old World during the nineteen thirties and nineteen forties.<sup>119</sup> And yet she was critical of both romantics and romanticising. A footnote in her *Existenz* essay attributed Heidegger's 'complete irresponsibility', his 'delusion of genius' mixed with 'desperation', to his being 'the last (we hope) romantic'.<sup>120</sup> And there was no looking back to the delights of prelapsarian joy and perfection or, for that matter, forward to a hoped for radical political upheaval, which might serve as a pathway to redemption. At other times, again in *The Human Condition*, for example, Arendt indicated a progressive loss of experience associated with developments in science and the advance of Cartesian doubt, for instance. Yet, she did not indicate to what extent earlier times, before the decay set in, were politically better.

The essence of what she intended us to understand by experience is ironically indicated, I think, by critical remarks Adorno made against Heidegger. In these remarks he, Adorno, stated that his own 'concept [of experience] is not intended to capture phenomenological "ur-experience"; nor like the interpretation of Hegel in Heidegger's *Holzwege*, is it intended to get at something ontological'.<sup>121</sup> Adorno,

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119 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

120 Arendt, 'What is *Existenz* Philosophy?', 46.

121 Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, cited in Jay, *Songs*, 352.

whose own concept of authentic experience Jay has remarked ‘never fully sorted out the welter of denotations and connotations that cling to th[is] numinous word’ was at least distancing himself from Heidegger, though. Yet, while Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy led her, like Adorno, off the Heideggerian track leading to the appropriation of Being, nevertheless, in common with her former teacher she too, I think, was bent on ‘get[ing] at something ontological’.<sup>122</sup> In contrast to Heidegger, it was not the disclosure of Being that was the ultimate prize. Instead, what Arendt believed was illuminated by experience was the ontological structure of the human condition itself, a politically inspired ontology that, in fact, privileged the very other, the neighbour, whose centrality in modern metaphysics Heidegger had found so perturbing. Heidegger had stated, for example, in his criticisms of Hegel made in the early 1940s that his, Hegel’s, ‘[e]xperience is the beingness of beings, whose determination, *qua subjectum*, is determined in terms of subjectness’.<sup>123</sup> Though herself critical of Hegel, it was precisely the subject as neighbour, and in her later work the subject as spectator with the critical distance that made judgement and political discourse possible, who Hannah Arendt foregrounded in her own writings.

This should not be taken to suggest that Arendt was herself guilty of reducing experience to the expression, albeit in public discourse, of merely the spectator’s personal *Erlebnis*. Hers was, of course, a “materialistic” political philosophy in the sense that reminders about the objectivity of the surrounding world were never far from the centre of her writing. Indeed, part of the problem of experience in the

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122 Jay, *Songs*, 360. After the Second World War, Heidegger published a collection of pieces on Art, Nietzsche and poetry, which included ‘Hegel’s Concept of Experience’. Originally published under the title *Holzwege* the English version was published as *Off the Beaten Track*, edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

123 Martin Heidegger, *Hegel’s Concept of Experience*, translated by Kenley Royce Dove (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 119. Emphasis in original.

modern world was reflected, she thought, in ‘the curious discrepancy between language and theory which [...] turns out to be a discrepancy between the world-oriented “objective” language we speak and the man-oriented, subjective theories we use in our attempts at understanding’.<sup>124</sup> Far from being an expression of *Erlebnis*, the Arendtian spectator’s political experience surely involves something akin, I would argue, to Adorno’s description of ‘the experience of art [as] ‘the irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness’ though Arendt, recalling Benjamin again, tended to talk in terms of feelings of sheer awe experienced when standing before the objective world rather than ‘irruptions’.<sup>125</sup>

Either way though, whether it was the ‘intense shudder’ or ‘tremor’ of aesthetic experience felt by Adorno’s subject, or the awe felt by Arendt’s political spectator, the point is surely that it was *Erfahrung* that was, in both instances, being defended here and a protest against the fundamental absence of the subject that was being registered. In Hannah Arendt’s case, this absence would be confronted by attempting to revitalise the other through what eventually would be offered, in *The Human Condition* and subsequent works, as a *reorientation* of political thought involving the reconstitution of public discourse conditional upon plurality and interdependency. In other words, Arendt believed that the fundamental absence of the other in modern experience could be rectified.

It is worth remembering, however, that she did not start out as a political thinker. A student first of Heidegger then of Jaspers it took a while, by Arendt’s own account, for her to become politically aware in the early 1930s. Yet, even in her earliest writings

<sup>124</sup> Arendt, *HC*, 94.

<sup>125</sup> Theodor W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedmann, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), 245.

which included the 1929 doctoral dissertation on the concept of love in Saint Augustine, to which I now turn, it seems to me that she was absorbed with thinking about what it means to be with others, what it means to live amongst neighbours. And she began to set down principles, to illuminate truths, that would later become central to her political theory.

## CHAPTER 2

**Being with One Another Reconsidered:  
Love, History and Saint Augustine**

*I distinguish the teaching of Christ from the report which we have of the teaching of Christ, and in order to get at the former I try above all to extract the moral teaching separated from all precepts of the New Testament. The former is surely the fundamental doctrine of the Gospel, the latter can only be an auxiliary doctrine [...].*

Immanuel Kant<sup>126</sup>

*The special hermeneutic of empathy will have to show how Being-with-one-another and Dasein's knowing of itself are led astray and obstructed by the various possibilities of Being which Dasein itself possesses, so that genuine 'understanding' gets suppressed, and Dasein takes refuge in substitutes [...].*

Martin Heidegger<sup>127</sup>

*The several parts of this essay are linked only by the question concerning the other being's relevance.*

Hannah Arendt<sup>128</sup>

Wittgenstein observed about his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that it was actually two books – one comprising all that he had said (written), the other all that he had *not said*. Hannah Arendt's doctoral dissertation on the the concept of love in the works of Saint Augustine is not just two books; it strikes me that she went one better than Wittgenstein in producing *three* books. First, there is the text that she submitted in 1929 as her dissertation, a document completed under the supervision of Karl Jaspers at the University of Heidelberg. Then there is the edited text dating from the 1960s when she revisited it and began to make alterations. Finally, since she did not complete those alterations, we are left to speculate, as in the case of the *Tractatus*, upon what the author did not say but, in Arendt's case, might have said, if she had completed her revisions.

126 Immanuel Kant, from a letter to Johann Casper Lavater dated 24 April 1775, cited in S. Körner, *Kant* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 170–71. Emphases in original.

127 Heidegger, *BT*, 163.

128 Arendt, *LSA*, 4.



In the late nineteen twenties, Arendt became a doctoral student at Heidelberg. In choosing Saint Augustine as a field of research she reflected something of a trend amongst German university scholars interested in this Founding Father of the Christian Church. Hans Jonas, for instance, a friend and colleague of Arendt is reported to having said when asked, not about Arendt in particular but about research on Saint Augustine in general, that ‘such a topic would not have been that unusual in the German universities of the time.’<sup>129</sup> Arendt was not untypical either, for that matter, amongst German-*Jewish* scholars and thinkers in choosing an aspect of Christianity to study. Erich Fromm, published *The Dogma of Christ* in 1931 for instance,<sup>130</sup> and Micheal Löwy informs us that Gustav Landauer, ‘the Jewish anarchist writer’, took many of his religious references from Christianity while Martin Buber published an essay in 1901 on Jakob Böhme, the seventeenth century mystic. Indeed, Löwy comments, it was ‘a common interest in Christian mysticism [...] that brought Landauer and Buber closer together on a personal level after they met for the first time in 1900.’<sup>131</sup> It is also worth mentioning that prior to her enrolment at the University of Marburg in 1924, Arendt had spent a number of semesters completing her schooling at the University of Berlin where, as a teenager, she was first introduced, by Romano Guardini, to the works of Søren Kierkegaard and even entertained the thought of later studying Theology. Added to this, her detailed reading with Heidegger of the works of Saint Paul coupled with the fact that at Marburg she also attended Bultmann’s New Testament seminars, all make the decision to research

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129 Hans Jonas cited in, *LSA*, xv.

130 Erich Fromm, *The Dogma of Christ: And Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

131 Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 132.

the concept of love in the writings of a Christian bishop and saint a little less out of the ordinary.

Arendt's dissertation was issued by the Berlin based publishing house of Julius Springer shortly after its completion. It appeared then as the ninth and final dissertation in a series of his students' doctoral theses that Jaspers collected under the title 'Philosophische Forschungen', and was referred to as, *Liebesbegriff bei Augustin: Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation*.<sup>132</sup> Substantial revisions were planned for a new edition. By the early 1960s the document had been waiting three and a half decades for the changes to be made and one suspects that the alterations Arendt planned to make at that time were quite different to the ones she might have made thirty years earlier. Consequently, the version of the document edited by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark in the mid-1990s, represents not only the *rediscovery* of a text generally overlooked by Arendt scholars; it also marked the *discovery* of a text that Arendt had, around 1962, in respect of a contract with Crowell-Collier, revisited in order to make a number of alterations in advance of a planned publication for 1964-65.

The editors of the dissertation, Vecchiarelli Scott and Chelius Stark, comment that the revisions Arendt began to make in the nineteen sixties 'demonstrate her continuing commitment to the subject matter, mode of discourse, and conclusions she had produced in 1929'.<sup>133</sup> On the other hand George McKenna argues, for instance, that Arendt was in effect working in reverse to try and identify in Augustine lines in his

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132 Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds), *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926–1969*, translated by Robert and Rita Kimber (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992), Note to Letter 10, 691.

133 Hannah Arendt, *LSA*, x.

thinking that she had, she thought, missed the first time around.<sup>134</sup> Vecchiarelli Scott and Chelius Stark have skilfully analysed her alterations, which apply to greater and lesser extents to each of the three main divisions of the dissertation, indicating at which points the changes were either typed into a fresh manuscript or remained only as hand written insertions. As it turned out, Arendt's project was actually never completed. McKenna comments that this was probably less because of the heavy demands of her other commitments (Vecchiarelli Scott and Chelius Stark's explanation) and more because Arendt herself ultimately realised that what she was attempting just 'wasn't working': the dissertation simply would not 'bear the weight of her mature thought'.<sup>135</sup> I take this to imply that McKenna assumes the lines of thinking that she was trying to attribute to Augustine, in order to make him more consistent with the political thinking underpinning her mature writings, were not actually there. It is worth noting that a similar charge of reading into Augustine ideas which he had not, in fact, entertained, had been levelled against Arendt's 1929 document by none other than Jaspers himself, resulting in her being recommended for a II-I (cum laude) rather than the highest grade for her doctoral research.<sup>136</sup>

There may well, I think, be a degree of truth in what McKenna suggests, particularly as Arendt herself was the first to admit that as a student she was not political.

Therefore, what she wrote in 1929 would surely not have reflected what had become her politically focussed interests more than three decades later. Still, the question that suggests itself is why was Hannah Arendt remotely interested, more than three decades after she had first written it, in returning to her doctoral dissertation of the

134 George McKenna, 'Augustine Revisited' [online] in *First Things* 72 (April 1997): 43–47, available from: <http://print.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9704/mckenna.html> (Accessed 20 March 2006).

135 Ibid., 42.

136 See Jaspers comments and recommendations in respect of Arendt's doctoral dissertation, Kohler and Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 690.

late 1920s? Clearly, her investigation of Augustine's treatment of love remained sufficiently important to her to want to return to it with a view to re-publication. In other words, she was not disposed in the early 1960s to look upon her earlier research either as an undertaking of little lasting value and so best consigned to a filing cabinet in some far off corner of a remote archive, or as something *inconsistent* with her mature political philosophy. So, what was its significance?

Before answering this question it is important to be clear first about the basic problem Arendt was trying to address in the dissertation. Essentially, her expressed concern was with the grounds upon which love for one's neighbour could make any sense given that, in a Christian context, one's love should be for God alone and not for the surrounding material world or any of its contents. As she indicated in her introduction to the dissertation's three sections, she would consider 'the question of how the person in God's presence, isolated from all things mundane, can be at all interested in his neighbor'.<sup>137</sup> To all intents and purposes love could not be secured, she thought, simply by the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. However, the grounds of neighbourly love could be demonstrated 'by proving the neighbour's relevance in a wholly different context'.<sup>138</sup> By this she meant, I think, it could be demonstrated by exploring the New Testament's treatment of grace.

To return to my earlier question about the significance of Arendt's research, the answer to this question concerns, I would argue, the fact that Arendt had been a student of Heidegger at precisely the time he was working on his magnum opus, *Being and Time*. In a letter to Heidegger that Arendt wrote on 12 March 1970 she

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<sup>137</sup> Arendt, *LSA*, 7.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

described his, Heidegger's, genius in terms of his having 'created real room for thought'.<sup>139</sup> At Marburg during the 1920s she and the other students attending his classes and his lectures had been captivated by something completely new. Thinking had seemingly come to life again. To mark the occasion of Heidegger's eightieth birthday in 1969, Arendt wrote a piece published, originally in German, and subsequently in English in the *New York Review of Books*. In it she described the philosophical environment twenty-five years earlier in the following terms:

The rumor that attracted them [the students] to Freiburg and to the Privatdozent who taught there, as somewhat later they were attracted to the young professor at Marburg, had it that there was someone who was actually attaining "the things" that Husserl had proclaimed, someone who knew that these things were not academic matters but the concerns of thinking men – concerns not just of yesterday and today, but from time immemorial – and who, precisely because he knew that the tradition was broken, was discovering the past anew.<sup>140</sup>

Nevertheless, despite such high praise from someone who, when she had first met Heidegger at the tender age of eighteen had secretly declared her "unbending devotion to a single one"<sup>141</sup> we should not be fooled into thinking that, intellectually, Arendt was indebted to and thus uncritical of the philosopher. In actual fact she was, I believe, as demonstrated throughout her writings, extremely critical of many of Heidegger's central ideas. And, her opposition can clearly be detected, I think, in her very first major piece of writing, the dissertation on Augustine's treatment of love. Here, to avoid any category mistakes, it must be noted that Arendt began to challenge aspects of Heidegger's fundamental consideration of *being with others* on the basis of an *historical* not an ontological line of reasoning. To put this another way, while her

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139 Hannah Arendt, and Martin Heidegger: *Letters 1925–1975*, edited by Ursula Ludz and translated by Andrew Shields (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Inc, 1998), 120.

140 Hannah Arendt, 'Martin Heidegger at 80' in *New York Review of Books* 17/6 (21 October 1971): 50–54.

141 Hannah Arendt, cited in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 53.

opposition was undeniable what distinguished it was the fact that it constituted an *historical* dress rehearsal prefiguring the full blooded ontological performance against the ‘*existential analytic of Dasein*’<sup>142</sup> that Arendt’s post-war publication of *The Human Condition* represented. Why then, the eventual change of tack and of tactics? What I am arguing, is that Arendt’s doctoral dissertation of 1929 showed first, that she was unpersuaded by what Heidegger had been writing and teaching in the nineteen twenties regarding ‘Being-with-one-another’ and individual authenticity, and secondly, that she thought she could undermine some of his key ontological claims as expressed in *Being and Time* by exposing them to what, for her was the authority conveyed by empirical truths of history.<sup>143</sup> Totalitarianism and the *Shoah* would, of course, change everything. With the rupturing of history, authority would lose its force and Arendt would return to the dissertation to reformulate its attack on Heidegger in terms of a rival ontology. In 1929 though, history was still sufficient for her purposes.

Before considering this further I want, however, to address a possible concern. Given my desire to reveal Arendt’s thinking in the late 1920s in terms of the ideas *then* shaping her outlook in relation to Heidegger’s radical philosophy, it needs to be asked to what extent this can actually be achieved by drawing on the current edition of her dissertation edited by Vecchiarelli Scott and Chelius Stark, which now blends new changes with the earlier preliminary translation undertaken by E. B. Ashton. Here, reassurance comes from the editors whose comments are taken on trust. They state that, ‘even without Arendt’s revisions, the Ashton translation was problematic. Faithful to the text and painfully literal as a result, the translation left thickets of

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<sup>142</sup> Heidegger, *BT*, 34. Emphasis in original.

<sup>143</sup> See footnote 10 above.

impenetrable phenomenological discourse in place. Awkward phrasing, repetition, and general incomprehensibility were constant difficulties'. They continue by stating that their own 'additions and revisions expand upon rather than fundamentally reorient the original dissertation', while in regard to Arendt's own alterations, 'there is no break in lines of argument, mode of discourse, or subject matter'.<sup>144</sup> So, echoing Charles Mathewes here, my hope is that while being free from what he cites Mark Jordan as describing as 'the old philologists' fetish of "sources"', the 'central dynamics' of Arendt's thinking have nevertheless been captured.<sup>145</sup>

The early to late 1920s was a period of gestation in Heidegger's thinking which culminated in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*.<sup>146</sup> Heidegger's mission was no less than the recovery of Being itself, which he argued, as a result of the ontological meanderings of a whole host of metaphysicians ending with Kant, had been banished to the backwaters of philosophy. In preparation for his "rescue operation", as it were, Heidegger had written a series of lectures, which, we are informed 'were presented in his classes in 1925–26 and finally published in 1929 as *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*'.<sup>147</sup> Arendt's exposure to these lectures came on the back of having studied Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* three years earlier.<sup>148</sup> Thus, it can be justifiably assumed that already from the mid-1920s onwards, she was becoming increasingly familiar with the thought of Immanuel Kant, a philosopher for whom she demonstrated much regard

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144 Arendt, *LSA*, xiii.

145 Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 62.

146 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962).

147 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 48.

148 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: and other Writings*, edited by Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

throughout her life and on whose political philosophy she would later compose her own series of lectures.

The lessons Arendt learnt from her exposure to Kant inform her dissertation. There is a Kantian presence in it from the very outset. What is the basis for this argument? There is, for example, no overt consideration of Kant's reasoning about the possibility of, say, *moral* as opposed to religious experience or his discussion of the categorical imperative; nor is God revealed either in Arendt's treatment of Augustine, or, for that matter, independently by Arendt herself, to be a *postulate*, little more than a necessary condition of practical reason, that he had become for Kant. God's divinity, his status as *creator*, as the first principle, never seems to be in doubt in Arendt's dissertation and judgement about man's conduct in the world is considered from the point of view of man's relationship with the creator as opposed to his apprehension of and overriding commitment to the *moral law* (through which, in Kant's opinion, God, as a non-phenomenal "object", *receives guarantee*). However, it is at least partly in relation to what follows upon Kant's pietistic discussion of morality and religion as set out in *The Critique of Practical Judgement* and in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* that Hannah Arendt's treatment of Augustine in her dissertation, and shortly afterwards in the paper entitled 'The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question', needs to be understood, I think. Kant's presence in those writings reflects not only a philosophical influence, but in addition reveals the nature of Arendt's own contribution to attempts at reclaiming German-Jewish relations in the light of the experience of modern German Jewry from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. Varied contributions to that task of recovery came from, for example, Hermann Cohen, Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig. In contrast, Otto Weininger and



Gershom Scholem signalled that they believed, for different reasons, that the retrieval of any such relations was an utterly unattainable objective. Weininger internalised the anti-Semitic prejudices that were part and parcel of the German-Jewish experience, to the point of committing suicide; Scholem, on the other hand, simply would not concede that there had even been a German-Jewish dialogue in the first place clearly.<sup>149</sup>

Kant believed that, though independent of each other, there was an inextricable connection between the moral law, apprehension of which underpinned human conduct, and religion. Nevertheless, ‘an act of faith [was] required to close the logical gap between morality and the Idea of God as a “moral legislator outside man”’.<sup>150</sup> As a consequence, Kant argued that reason drew a clear line between, on the one hand particular religious creeds and, on the other, ‘religion which by an act of faith gives life to the Idea of God [...]’.<sup>151</sup> According to Kant:

There is only *one* true religion; but there can be many varieties of religious creeds [...] it is, therefore, more appropriate to say: this man is of the Jewish, Mohammedan, Christian religious creed, than: he is of this or that religion.

Logically therefore, it seems that Kant believed that the Idea of God indicated that religious certainty was intimately bound up with morality, with that is, the moral law, but divorced from anything attaching to *particular* confessions of faith. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whom Arendt discussed in her 1932 paper entitled ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’ and about whom, in 1959, she would deliver

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<sup>149</sup> In this regard the following sources are invaluable: Jeffrey S. Librett, *The Rhetoric of Cultural Dialogue: Jews and Germans from Moses Mendelssohn to Richard Wagner and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Willi Goetschel, *Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); and, Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>150</sup> Stephan Körner, *Kant* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 169.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

an address on receiving the Lessing Prize, praising his unsystematic manner of thinking, adapted Kant's ideas in his now well known parable of the ring.<sup>152</sup>

The parable is related in Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise*. It actually derives from the *Decameron* of the fourteenth century Italian poet, Giovanni Boccaccio, and, in Lessing's play, forms part of a dialogue between Saladin, a Sultan, and Nathan, a rich Jew. It concerns a king who one day receives 'a ring/Of priceless estimate' that affords him much power.<sup>153</sup> The king passes the ring on to his son, and subsequently it continues to be passed from father to son across the generations, until the magic ring eventually ends up in the possession of a man who has three sons who 'He loved alike'.<sup>154</sup> To which of these sons should he bequeath the ring? This is his dilemma. As it turns out the father bequeathes it to each of them but only as a result of commissioning duplicates so that none of his sons experiences disappointment or feels rejected. However, as the events of the story unfold, it becomes clear that, in fact, *none* of the recipients actually inherits 'The magic power' possessed by the genuine ring that would have brought 'its wearer love/And grace with God and man'. Only the original ring would have had the power to achieve that, but it is not known precisely what happened to it or whether or not, for instance, it was at some point in time lost to all beyond recovery.

Lessing's parable differs from Kant's observations on religion in precisely the sense that the loss to mankind of the magical ring suggests that there is ultimately not even the *one* true religion that Kant envisaged. In her 1932 paper Arendt discussed this

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152 Published as: 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing' in Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 3–31.

153 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise: A Dramatic Poem in Five Acts*, translated by W. A. Steel. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1931), Act III, Scene VII, 166.

154 Ibid.

point observing that for Lessing the loss of the ring was not really a loss at all but assumed a positive aspect in that in contrast to German Enlightenment thinking, which understood truth in terms of religious revelation, in Lessing significance came to be placed less on truth itself as on the *seekers* after truth, that is on the human beings searching for it. (This echoed, as we shall see in Chapter 4, Arendt's thoughts about the positive side to our having been abandoned by God.) Man was no longer regarded as caretaker of a property against which his own value was measured. Historical man had now come of age and had attained a value and independence of his own. For Lessing different faiths were, in Arendt's estimation, merely different labels for one and the same thing, whereas for Kant Christianity just so happened to embody the principles which guaranteed its connection with *morality* and, furthermore, justified its being recognised as the universal religion true for all.

There are shades of this idea, I think, in Arendt's own later evaluation of the attempted obliteration of European Jewry by the Nazis as a crime against *humanity* perpetrated on the Jewish people. That is, there seems to be a connection with her commitment to pluralism and to the *political* equality that attaches to all peoples. She did not perceive the Nazis as having committed a crime purely against God's chosen people; they had committed a crime, in fact, against all peoples, their victims just happened to be the Jews. From the viewpoint of the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, what is suggested is that if Arendt was aware of Kant's views on religion – and there is every reason to believe that she was – then she would have wanted to discuss Augustine in a manner that freed him from Christian doctrine, which masked the real message of Christ's Gospel behind the ecclesiastical authority of historical interpretation and dogma as well as statutory law. This partly explains why she

undertook what she described as an investigation that she hoped would disclose a ‘pretheological sphere’ and is behind Jasper’s acknowledgement of her wanting to get at ‘the essentials’ of what Augustine had thought about this subject. She sought to get behind explanations, hypotheses and dogma to the essence of the Gospels and the Christian’s inviolable faith. Both of these she seems to have understood in a non-theological sense and this, I think, she was able to achieve at least in part as a result of having read Kant. To explain briefly, in a similar sense to Kant’s treatment of Christianity as the one truly universal religion, Arendt gave the impression, at least in the late nineteen twenties and early nineteen thirties, of having regarded grace as containing a message universal to all. Grace is a universal reminder, she suggested, that each of us has sinned in the past and in so reminding us it ‘permits us to understand the binding equality of *all people* [...] in the presence of God.’<sup>155</sup> It was the manner in which grace refused to discriminate between people, regarding all as equally guilty, that was, for Arendt, the important message. I will return to this point. However, for the moment we should note that Arendt’s motives for undertaking her ‘pretheological’ excursion through Augustine were not only to disclose the fundamental equality of human beings. She had another objective too and that was to expose the ontology of her former teacher, Martin Heidegger, to some truths of history.

The Weimar period of her youth produced both Jewish thinkers, for example, Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Walter Benjamin and Leo Strauss, as well as such non-Jewish thinkers as Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger who stridently challenged the confidence that had

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<sup>155</sup> Arendt, *LSA*, 106. Emphasis added.

come to be placed in history as a source either of solutions to the problems of Judaism or of reliable knowledge in respect of Protestant theology. Barth, for example, already mentioned above, regarded history as the type of unrewarding analysis to which men only turned in times of spiritual penury. He fiercely opposed attempts to consider in terms of historical research, the lives of such towering spiritual figures as Jesus, a practice which, he argued, humanised the divine, as it were, and which a number of modern Protestant scholars had found very appealing. Similarly, Rosenzweig is a very good example of the sort of anti-historicist Jewish thinker of the early twentieth century who believed that an all-consuming respect for the methods of history *shrouded* that spiritual province, indispensable to human existence, which was beyond the comprehension of the rationalistic methodologies of the liberal historian.

To this extent, Arendt reflects a strong affinity with anti-historicist thinkers of both Protestant and Jewish persuasion. However, the first point that needs to be made clear is that there is an important contrast to be drawn between her and thinkers like Rosenzweig, Buber and Scholem. Rosenzweig, for instance, in writing the *Star of Redemption*, published in 1922 and in overseeing the establishment of the Lehrhaus in the 1920s, was seeking to draw back to Judaism ‘the large pool of Jewish adults drifting aimlessly in the sea of German culture’.<sup>156</sup> The appeal to deeper understanding of classical Jewish sources including the Torah, and more intimate awareness of the Jewish prayer book and the Hebrew language, were clearly aimed at a revival of Jewish identity and spirituality. Similarly, as I have already mentioned, Martin Buber was calling, at the same time as Rosenzweig, for nothing short of a Jewish spiritual *Renaissance*. And, in Gershom Scholem’s work too, there were clear indications of a

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<sup>156</sup> Myers, *Resisting History*, 90

“retreat” from the Jews’ engagement with European culture, a critique and rebellion against that culture’, in fact, which was part of a wider *Zionist* project that, it was hoped, would result in ‘an immediate constructive engagement of the Jews with their own concrete past history’.<sup>157</sup> Arendt’s desire to marginalise all that was *non-essential* (an expression I will try to explain shortly) about history was not, however, accompanied by any similar ideological commitment. She would, of course, write a number of books and numerous articles in which ideas at the core of modern Jewish experience were central. She would, in the years immediately following the Second World War, devote herself to the recovery of Jewish artefacts, cultural and religious treasures, tirelessly seeking homes for them in Israel, Europe, and the United States of America. And, she too would be drawn to Zionism and work, for a time in the mid-1940s, to establish a federal state of Jews and Palestinians. Her Jewishness would always be something of which she was proud and upon which she never sought to turn her back, even for a moment. Yet, in the wake of the destruction wrought by the *Shoah* there would be no lifelong project attempting to breathe new cultural and spiritual energy into Judaism. There would be no succumbing to lachrymose sentimentality either, and her biting criticisms of many Jews, from David Friedländer, in the 1932 paper ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’ to the community leaders in the Nazi-controlled ghettos of Europe or the prosecuting counsel at the Eichmann trial, would be just as incisive and vehement as it was with regard to anyone else on whom her critical eye fixed.

Paradoxically however, although Hannah Arendt resisted history on one level she was clearly very much concerned with it on another as the discussions in any number of

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<sup>157</sup> Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, 118–119.

her books and articles demonstrate. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *On Revolution*, the essays collected in *Between Past and Future* are each replete with historical analyses. So, this brings me to a further contrast that must be drawn, one that is crucial to understanding both Martin Heidegger's treatment of history and her own. This is the distinction made possible by discrete German words for '*Historie*', that is the flow of events and facts that come and go and are now consigned to the past, as it were, and '*Geschichte*', which Heidegger understood as "deep" history that has the character not of 'that which is chronicled' but of an historical imprint or long lasting impression, something that is, which is likely to endure for generations.<sup>158</sup> Heidegger adopted the concept of *Geschichte* and introduced it into his lectures in the late nineteen thirties. He perceived ancient classical Greece, for example, to have constituted just the 'beginning', the source of fundamental modes of thought whose reverberations we are still feeling more than two and a half thousand years later. 'The history of being is never past', he wrote, 'but stands ever before us; it sustains and defines every *condition et situation humaine*.'<sup>159</sup> And earlier, in 'The Self-Assertion of the German University' written in 1933, he had stated, 'the beginning *exists* still. It does not lie *behind us*, as something long past, but it stands *before us*'.<sup>160</sup>

By describing Hannah Arendt as being predominantly concerned with the *essentials* of history or with the recovery, as in Benjamin, of fragments of *genuine* historical experience, I mean to convey the sense that her writings demonstrate a Heideggerian preoccupation with *Geschichte*, with what is relevant to *deep* history rather than with

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158 Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology' in *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, edited by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 306.

159 Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, edited by William McNeill and translated by John van Buren *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 240.

160 Martin Heidegger, 'The Self-Assertion of the German University' translated by William S. Lewis in Richard Wolin (ed.), *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1993), 32. Emphases in original.

what is effectively a ‘mere chronicle of an inert past [the] unfolding sequence of unambiguous realities that are now over and done with’ (*Historie*).<sup>161</sup> Of course, deep history does not preclude an interest in everyday events where these events are regarded as manifestations of modes of thinking that have shaped and continue to shape our meaning perspectives, that is, the categories and concepts in terms of which we make sense of the world around us. The important point, however, is that for Arendt, as for Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, deep historical thinking was unambiguously “original” in that it always led back to a beginning. It was precisely for this reason, I would suggest, that Benjamin quoted Karl Kraus, to the effect that ‘Origin is the goal’, at the head of his fourteenth thesis on the philosophy of history.<sup>162</sup>

In Hannah Arendt’s later writings, by which I mean those dating from the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and certainly from *The Human Condition* onwards, the origin or beginning indicated not a point in time but the ontological structure according to which, she argued, life on earth had been gifted to human beings. She used the distinctions between labour, work and action to reorient our thinking and to secure the moorings of human experience that had, in the modern age, loosened and slipped. In short, her analyses were aimed at clarifying afresh the possibilities for *being with others* that totalitarianism had done so much to destroy. In this regard her historical writings became symbiotically bound up with ontology. The individual historical phenomenon was granted a deep historical dimension and originality by virtue of indicating something fundamentally ontological. So, her study of the American Revolution, for instance, came to serve as a type of *phenomenon of origin* in that it permitted a glimpse of truly politically motivated actions whose political

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161 Reé, *Heidegger*, 48.

162 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 263.



character resided in the fact of their being consistent with the conditions of what it means to be human.<sup>163</sup> The events of this Revolution were, in other words, exemplary (in a Kantian sense to be discussed below) in that they illuminated and therefore indicated, at least for those looking on if not necessarily for those taking part, something fundamentally *original*. On the other hand, the destructiveness of totalitarianism also led back to the origin because it was not so much the laying waste of buildings, bridges and other structures or the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children that was so devastating, egregious and deplorable as these occurrences were, so much as the assault against ontology itself. National Socialism, in attempting to annihilate the Jews by wiping them off the face of the earth constituted a crime against Being perpetrated upon beings, all beings, as it were. This, for Hannah Arendt, was what distinguished totalitarianism from dictatorship. It represented an attack upon the very conditions of *being with others* that underpin the concept of politics.

However, in the mid to late 1920s while she was still engaged in doctoral research, her ontological ideas were, we can confidently assume, still largely unformed. Thus, when she aspired to illuminating, in the introduction to her dissertation, ‘a pretheological sphere’, she should *not* be taken as indicating that she was aiming to disclose something fundamentally ontological. This would have to wait until her revisions of the dissertation planned for the mid-1960s, by which time she had formulated a quite sophisticated line of reasoning in this regard. Rather, her purpose in the nineteen twenties was confined to making *historical* points, and at least one of

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163 For a discussion of the concept of the phenomenon of origin see Stéphane Mosès, ‘Benjamin’s Metaphors of Origin: Names, Ideas, Stars’ in Timothy Bhati and Marilyn Sibley Fries (eds.), *Jewish Writers, German Literature: The Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 139 – 154.

these was, in fact, quite a deep historical point, targeted at Heidegger's specific analysis of 'Being-with-one-another' and especially his depiction of '*Authentic Being-one's-Self*' as simply a '*modification of the "they"*'.<sup>164</sup> My argument does not, I believe, depend upon Heidegger's having worked out the precise details of his own framework of deep history prior to the time Arendt was completing her dissertation. This is because Arendt's critique was confined to attacking what Heidegger had written in *Being and Time*. Nevertheless, I believe it to be a reasonable assumption that he had already at least put together some ideas in his mind, however rudimentary, in relation to *Geschichte* and had aired these with Arendt, if only in private, while she was still his student at Marburg.

Dasein was undeniably, for Heidegger, a social creature. In *Being and Time* he explained that:

In our "description" of that environment which is closest to us – the work-world of the craftsman [...] the outcome was that along with the equipment to be found when one is at work, those Others for whom the work is destined are "encountered" too. If this is ready-to-hand, then there lies in the kind of Being which belongs to it (that is, in its involvement) an essential assignment or reference to possible wearers, for instance, for whom it should be "cut to the figure". Similarly, when material is put to use, we encounter its producer or "supplier" as one who "serves" well or badly. [...] The Others who are thus "encountered" in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment are not somehow added on in thought to some Thing which is proximally just present-to-hand; such "Things" are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for others – a world which is always mine too in advance.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Heidegger, *BT*, 168.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 153–154.

As Stephen Mulhall notes, others are therefore significant for Dasein in at least three senses.<sup>166</sup> First, they constitute another type of being that Dasein will unavoidably come into contact with in the world. Secondly, the activities with which Dasein is engaged in the world involve the use of ‘equipment’ that either others supply or to whom it will duly pass. And thirdly, whatever objects one Dasein finds ready-to-hand any other Dasein must be capable of finding ready-to-hand as well. In this sense, Mulhall comments, ‘readiness-to-hand is inherently intersubjective’ and Dasein ‘is essentially social’.<sup>167</sup>

Two further points should additionally be noted. First, although Heidegger is providing an ontological account of *being with others* here what he says should not be taken as excluding the possibility that Dasein can be alone if it chooses to be. On what he describes as an ‘ontic’ as opposed to an ontological level, that is, in terms of its everyday activities, of course Dasein can, if it decides to, look for solitude. That said, isolation or aloneness represents an *insufficiency*, as it were, because ontologically Dasein is a social creature. Heidegger writes, ‘[t]he Other can *be missing* only *in* and *for* a Being-with.’<sup>168</sup> Secondly, Heidegger argued that just as Dasein displays an attitude of care towards the objects it encounters in the world, so the manner in which it is with others like itself indicates an attitude of ‘solicitude’.<sup>169</sup> Of course, Dasein need not display solicitude for others if it chooses not to. It can act against them or simply neglect them by passing them by without even the merest acknowledgement. Again though, ‘deficient and Indifferent [*sic*] modes that characterize everyday,

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166 Stephen Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time* (London: Routledge, 1996).

167 Ibid., 66.

168 Heidegger, *BT*, 157. Emphasis in original.

169 Ibid.

average Being-with-one-another', are not ontologically rooted.<sup>170</sup> Fundamentally, Dasein demonstrates care.

In contrast to Heidegger's ontological discussion of society, Hannah Arendt, in Part III of her dissertation, located what she believed to be the roots of the 'social organism' in an inescapable 'equality [...] of situation', at once both 'definite and obligatory' but, above all, *historical* rather than ontological.<sup>171</sup> Her choice of the expression 'organism', indicating interdependency, was telling. 'Worldly interdependence' or 'the mutual give and take in which people live together',<sup>172</sup> and the earthly society which grows out of this, she argued, are traceable to the historical fact that men are related to each other because of an undeniable 'common decent from Adam'.<sup>173</sup> She had been searching in Augustine for the grounds of a 'community of faith' that might solve the problem of the 'isolation' of the individual 'from his fellows in the divine presence'.<sup>174</sup> It was not an 'inner dialectics of faith',<sup>175</sup> however, that her inquiry eventually unearthed. 'Rather, it [was] a historically pre-existing reality',<sup>176</sup> and human *experience* of this that was disclosed, suggesting, as she had intimated at the outset of the dissertation, 'the neighbor's relevance in a wholly different context' to what might have been expected.<sup>177</sup> In the process, her appeal to both, history and experience, and the significance she judged we should place in trust, equality and kinship, for example, suggested that the guarantees of a Heideggerian ontology were much inflated. She wrote:

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170 Ibid., 158.

171 Arendt, *LSA*, 100.

172 Ibid., 101

173 Ibid., 101.

174 Ibid., 99.

175 Ibid.

176 Ibid.

177 Ibid., 7

We comprehend all history, that is, all human temporal acts by believing – which means by trusting, but never by understanding (*intelligere*). 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. The continued existence of humankind does not rest on the proof. Rather, it rests on necessary belief, without which social life would become impossible.<sup>178</sup>

What Arendt was doing in making this historical point was turning to empiricism as against ontology. Effectively, she appeared to be arguing that if we only stop to think about it, human interdependence, plurality, trust and equality (all of which she would discuss in her subsequent political philosophy) each stem from an ‘experiential ground’<sup>179</sup> that can be traced back to our origin in Adam, the father of all men, who thus represented a truly foundational moment in *human* history. This was the true significance, surely, of the Old Testament story about Eden, not the fact that Adam had been an *ens creatum* brought into the world by an *ens perfectissimum* or that he, Adam, and Eve had been duped by the serpent.<sup>180</sup>

There was a problem, though. Arendt was searching for the grounds of community within a Christian context. She judged that the nature of the equality deriving from kinship was not adequate for Augustine to speak of this as a *form of love* between men that was sufficiently powerful to rival *caritas*, their love of God. Alternatively put, she inquired, how ‘is it possible for their equality, based on the Christian sense of sin [...] to become obligatory for one gripped by faith? The creature knows itself dependent on the source, the epitome of being out of this world, that is, on the Creator. How can

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178 Ibid., 101.

179 Ibid., 99.

180 Heidegger discussed these concepts in relation to his treatment of Cartesianism. See *BT*, 125.

duties be derived from a past that is to be totally eradicated?’<sup>181</sup> Put another way, was it not the Christian’s duty to demonstrate his or her devotion to God by turning away from the material world including his or her fellow inhabitants? And did this not thereby consign him or her, of necessity, to a life spent in *isolation*? An appeal to Adam, it seemed was an insufficient guarantee of community against such isolation. Inspired however, by the discussion of grace in the Gospels, Arendt made another historical point in defence of community. Her argument, once again, contained serious implications for Heideggerian philosophy. In particular, given his gloomy depiction in *Being and Time* of what he judged *being with others* fundamentally amounted to (which it could be argued, was simply the result of his having been ensnared by an assessment of *das Man* engendered by having become fixated on mass society) Arendt’s defence of community reflected a much more optimistic assessment. Let us remind ourselves of what Heidegger was claiming.

A significant problem for Dasein, as indicated in the extract from *Being and Time* quoted at the head of this chapter is that, because it is *ontologically* a social being the extent to which it can be aware of its own authentic individuality is essentially determined by the way in which it understands and behaves in relation to other beings. As such, ‘Dasein’s knowing of itself [can be] led astray and obstructed by the various possibilities of Being which Dasein itself possesses, so that genuine “understanding” gets suppressed’.<sup>182</sup> And so Dasein has a choice. It can either mimic the appearance, behaviour, life style and opinions of those around it in an effort to “fit in”, as it were, and conform, or it can choose to try and be different. Even if it chooses to do the latter, however, by virtue of *reacting* to others it still allows its actions and

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181 Arendt, *LSA*, 104.

182 See footnote 127 above.

thoughts to be determined for it, though in a negative fashion rather than by way of conformity. Either way, its actions are not autonomous and not behaving in a way that could be judged authentic. The social circumstances in which Dasein finds itself in regard to its everyday activities are therefore extremely challenging, a situation made all the worse by virtue of being not simply the product of particular social and cultural arrangements but, rather, because Heidegger thought it constituted an ontological given:

Dasein, as everyday Being-with-one-another, stands in *subjection* to Others. It itself *is* not; its being has been taken away by the Others. Dasein's everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please. The Others, moreover, are not *definite* Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them. One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power. "The Others" whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one's belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part "*are there*" in everyday Being-with-one-another. The "who" is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all. The "who" is the neuter, *the "they"*.<sup>183</sup>

This state of 'Being-with-one-another' as part of an amorphous "they" or *das Man*, was about as appealing, from a psychological perspective, as Thomas Hobbes' seventeenth century description in *Leviathan* of men existing in a condition of complete insecurity in which life was 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short'.<sup>184</sup> In essence, *das Man* was a significant obstacle not only barring the way to Dasein's personal achievement of authenticity but generating too, ontological misunderstandings within philosophy. Unable to see beyond *das Man*, indeed swallowed up by it, Dasein's understanding of itself was described by Heidegger as

<sup>183</sup> Heidegger, *BT*, 164. Emphases in original.

<sup>184</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), 186.

being determined by the categories most readily available to it. These, Heidegger believed, were likely to be the categories of the inauthentic popular culture of which it formed a part. Dasein typically understands itself therefore, by means of ingesting and applying the language of current popular opinion, which, Heidegger judged, was inclined towards simplicity, shallowness and inauthenticity. Meanwhile, on a philosophical level, Mulhall concludes that Heidegger believed ‘[a]ny attempt to retrieve an authentic ontological understanding will accordingly appear to subvert obvious and self-evident truths, to overturn common sense and violate ordinary language’.<sup>185</sup>

To what extent we should ask, was Heidegger the victim of his own philosophical analysis? Was his critique of iniquitous *das Man* no more than a *reaction* on his part to the growing mass society in which he found himself, and thus, on his own terms, inauthentic? Was Heidegger simply the victim of history? When Hannah Arendt returned to her dissertation in the 1960s with a view to republishing it her alterations indicated her commitment to an ontology formulated in the aftermath of the Second World War. For example, the insertion in the dissertation of the term ‘natality’ – ‘the decisive fact determining man as a conscious, remembering being is birth or “natality”’<sup>186</sup> – introduced to her earlier line of reasoning ontological terminology intrinsic to her *post-war* understanding of the human condition.<sup>187</sup> In 1929 though, she found illumination, again, in a quite distinct empirical source, as she saw matters – the life of Christ and the possibility of grace. Having already in the first half of her chapter on the ‘Social Life’ drawn some conclusions about ‘historicity, that is, [...]

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<sup>185</sup> Mulhall, *Heidegger*, 69 – 70.

<sup>186</sup> *LSA*, 51.

<sup>187</sup> See, for example, Arendt’s discussion of natality at *HC*, 9.



mankind's own origin'<sup>188</sup> in Adam, she subsequently turned to 'God's revelation in Christ [...] as a *historical* fact'<sup>189</sup> to propose a fundamental argument in defence of community and against the isolation before God that an appeal to Adam still left as a possibility. The sense in which the argument was fundamental, I think, resided in the fact that it enabled her to cast doubt upon Heidegger's assessment, in *Being and Time*, both of his account of 'Being-with-one-another' and his assessment of the iniquities of *das Man*.

The more one reads *Love and Saint Augustine* in the light of Heidegger's philosophy, in close proximity to which it was composed, the more one becomes aware, I think, that, notwithstanding the fact that this a text in which the young student concerned herself with different varieties of love as discussed by the Christian bishop and saint, it was also an investigation very much bound up with the 'truths of history',<sup>190</sup> as Arendt interpreted them. And these "truths" she pitted against the claims of Heideggerian ontology. If it was the historical fact that everybody's roots can be traced back to Adam, which formed the basis for the first part of her discussion of social life, Arendt's second line of reasoning shifted to considering the significance of Christ. God's sacrifice of his Son, an all but incomprehensible demonstration of His love of mankind, was a sacrifice made that *all* might be redeemed and that *all* might be delivered from original sin. For every individual so redeemed, for every member of the human race saved by the grace of God, Arendt's interpretation of Augustine was that his neighbours serve as constant reminders of not just a shared, but also, all importantly, a sinful past. *None of us* is perfect was the message. "The whole world

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188 Arendt, *LSA*, 103.

189 Ibid., 105. Emphasis added.

190 See her discussion of Lessing on the 'truths of history' in 'The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question'.

was guilty from Adam””, she quoted Augustine as having written.<sup>191</sup> This established the grounds for a *new equality* and not, this time, simply an equality of kinship or of generation: ‘one should love one’s neighbor not on account of his sin, which indeed was the source of equality, but on account of the grace that has revealed itself in him as well as in oneself’.<sup>192</sup> It was Christ who made redemption possible. Furthermore, men also live in constant ‘peril’ of being lead to sin again, that is, of relapsing. In extending their concerns about this to include the other too, this peril was transformed into a ‘*common danger*’ upon which an ‘obligation’ to love the neighbour in order that he might be saved from such a fate, and escape ‘eternal death’, rested.<sup>193</sup>

What did the significance Arendt attached to grace indicate? In the first place the fact that she attempted to lift the New Testament account of Jesus Christ out of theological debate in order to get to the *essence* of the Gospels suggested a type of Kantian appeal to the universal in the seemingly particular. Her understanding of the Gospels recognised in them how they applied to mankind generally, in other words in similar fashion to Kant’s having believed that Christianity was the only truly universal religion. And in this Arendt appeared to be making a point about grace that suggested it had made a deeply significant imprint in human history. Heidegger would suggest that Christianity was the second of three such moments in *Geschichte*. (The other moments were first, when the Romans appropriated ancient Greek language and ideas substituting for an earlier pre-reflective experience of Being as ‘unconcealment’,<sup>194</sup> a robust and controlling Latin orientation towards reality; and second, when ‘*Ratio* and reason’ traceable to ‘the Roman re-interpretation of the Greek experience’ that

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191 Arendt, *LSA*, 102.

192 Ibid., 106.

193 Ibid., 109–110. Emphasis added.

194 See, for example, Martin Heidegger’s discussion of *alētheia*, in ‘The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking’, in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*.

‘contribut[ed] to the forgetting of Being [became] dominating concepts’ employed by seventeenth-century philosophers like Leibniz.<sup>195</sup>) Arendt, I think, concurred with Heidegger’s general assessment of Christianity but spelt out the details based upon her own understanding. Grace and the neighbourly conditional upon it were at the centre of this understanding. Indeed, they represented her empirical response, as it were, to Heidegger’s ontology of solicitude. ‘Through imitation’, Arendt observed, ‘everyone may initiate the impulse of saving one’s neighbor’.<sup>196</sup> Everyone is thus capable of demonstrating neighbourly love.

However, Arendt’s excursus on grace and neighbourly love indicates something in addition to this, targeted, I would contend, against Heidegger’s depiction of Dasein’s inauthenticity. Inauthenticity, Heidegger had suggested was intrinsic to Dasein’s very Being. He stated,

*Authentic Being-one’s-self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the “they”; *it is rather an existentiell modification of the “they”*.<sup>197</sup>

And despite the fact that Heidegger believed it was open to Dasein to live either authentically or inauthentically, he made it quite clear that its, Dasein’s, original position, as it were, was one of capitulation to, ‘dispersal into’ *das Man*.<sup>198</sup> The route to authenticity lay in Dasein’s being a practitioner. As a being whose worldhood depended upon its roles, functions and functional relations providing it with access to the objective environment, authenticity represented a *personal* achievement in respect of these roles and functions:

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195 Heidegger, *Parmenides*, 69.

196 Ibid., 110.

197 Heidegger, *BT*, 168. Emphases in original.

198 Ibid. Emphasis in original.

As they-self, the particular Dasein has been *dispersed* into the the “they”, and must first find itself. [...] If Dasein discovers the world in its own way and brings it close, if it discloses to itself its own authentic Being, then this discovery of the “world” and this disclosure of Dasein are always accomplished as a clearing away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars its own way.<sup>199</sup>

What Arendt argued in relation to grace challenged this, I think, in the following respects. First, she demonstrated in the dissertation, that she was unconcerned with personal authenticity. The whole thrust of her argument showed her concern for *being with others*, escaping isolation, establishing the grounds of community and neighbourly love. There was no indication in this of a preoccupation with individual or *personal* achievement. As indicated by the author in the introduction to her dissertation an extract from which is quoted at the head of this chapter, what linked the different parts of her text together was the question concerning the ‘*other* being’s relevance’.<sup>200</sup> In addition to this though, Arendt sought to establish an historical case, indeed a case rooted in *Geschichte*, against Heidegger’s depiction of the individual (Dasein) as simply being swallowed up by those in society around him (*das Man*). Neighbourly love, made possible by grace, was something very deeply ingrained in social life suggesting that the ontology of *Being and Time* was something of a distortion of the actual facts of human existence. (By the time she came to write about the ‘social realm’ in *The Human Condition*, for example, Arendt was far less enthusiastic about “society” as such.) In other words, Arendt’s analysis cast into relief, that is, illuminated, characteristics of social life that Heidegger had not noticed

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199 Ibid. Emphasis in original.

200 See footnote 128 above. Emphasis added.

perhaps because his perception was too much influenced by his contempt for the actualities of society around him beyond which he could not see.

Yet, Hannah Arendt's Kantian inspired interpretation of Augustine, which we must remember came from the pen of a Jewess, suggested that unlike so many of her contemporaries and near contemporaries, she did not, as a matter of course, share the belief that the Jews had any special relationship to God, or that they were in a biblical sense, His elect or His 'Chosen People'. In the context of Jewish historiography generally and the projects of such modern Jewish thinkers and scholars as Rosenzweig, for example, or Buber or Scholem in particular, who were calling for a Jewish renaissance and trying to instil a renewed vitality into Judaism, her discussion of grace was quite radical. The intriguing question, however, is, was it actually something more sinister than this? The penultimate paragraph to the dissertation concluded with these words:

According to Augustine's philosophy of history, before salvation through Christ, there was only the human race determined by Adam. [...] it is the very possibility of isolation that enables us to detach ourselves from human history and from its irrevocable enchainment by generation.<sup>201</sup>

Inspired by Kant, who expressed a number of anti-Semitic statements in his writings, was there a suggestion, perhaps, of latent anti-Semitism and self-hatred in Hannah Arendt, a desire maybe, to distance herself from her Jewish forbears? These are questions to which I turn in the next chapter where I consider what might conveniently be summarised by the somewhat formulaic expression: *being-Jewish-with-others*.

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201 Arendt, *LSA*, 112.

## CHAPTER 3

### In Cahoots with Kant?

or

### Being Jewish and Escaping the ‘Long Present’<sup>202</sup>

*Of course it is said that the freedom to speak or to write could be taken from us by a superior power, but the freedom to think cannot be. Yet how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts and who communicate theirs with us! Thus one can very well say that this external power which wrenches away people’s freedom publicly to communicate their thoughts also takes from them the freedom to think – that single gem remaining to us in the midst of all the burdens of civil life through which alone we can devise means of overcoming all the evils of our condition.*

Immanuel Kant<sup>203</sup>

*I am a Jew and I know nothing about the Jews. Henceforth I am a pariah, and I know not out of what elements to rebuild myself a dignity and a personality. I must learn who I am and why I am hated, and that which I can be.*

Bernard Lazare<sup>204</sup>

*If the present is to be understood at all, then the past must be explicitly seized anew.*

Hannah Arendt<sup>205</sup>

During the nineteen thirties, both prior to her flight from Germany in 1933 and in the years immediately following it, Hannah Arendt published several papers on specifically Jewish themes including, ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’ (1932), ‘Against Private Circles’ (1933), ‘The Jewish Question’ (1937 or 1938) and the extended essay entitled, ‘Antisemitism’ written around 1938 to 1939.<sup>206</sup> She also

202 The expression, the ‘long present’ is Abraham Geiger’s: ‘As Geiger saw it, contemporary Judaism was bereft of historical consciousness. It lived in a “long present” which had not so much grown out of the past as fully absorbed it’. Cited in Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 92.

203 Kant, *RRT*, 16. Emphases in original. Also see footnote 50 above.

204 Bernard Lazare, ‘Job’s Dungheap’, in Bernard Lazare, *Job’s Dungheap: Essays on Jewish Nationalism and Social Revolution*, translated by Harry Lorin Binsse, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 44.

205 Hannah Arendt, ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’, in Hannah Arendt, *TJW*, 16.

206 Each of these pieces has been published in Hannah Arendt, *TJW*.

completed the initial draft, again in 1933, of her biography, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, though the book would not actually get to be published for another twenty five years. To the extent that, as George Mosse has noted, ‘the “Jewish Question” had become an integral part of the political discourse’ in Weimar Germany by 1929, ‘assuming threatening dimensions which it had not possessed earlier’ Arendt’s research and published articles reflected her growing recognition that she needed to become engaged, to ‘do something’, as she put it to Gaus in a televised interview some years later.<sup>207</sup> They had an additional significance, though. Given her recent discussion of the importance of grace Arendt might be seen at this time as clarifying her thoughts and feelings about what being Jewish actually meant to her. She was doing this, in one sense, on a personal level, establishing for herself the sort of person she wanted to be and be seen to be. In this regard Rahel was as much a confidante as a subject of research: Arendt described her, in a letter to Heinrich Blücher written in 1936, as her ‘closest friend, though she has been dead for some one hundred years’.<sup>208</sup> Crucially, I think this involved elucidating what being Jewish in the midst of others meant in the post-emancipation world of the twentieth century. In this regard, the fact that Arendt was so inspired by Kantian philosophical ideas might be taken to indicate that her critical comments against, for example, Jewish sectarianism demonstrated that she concurred with the Königsberg philosopher’s anti-Jewish remarks. However, I think this would be the wrong judgement to make. The fact that she drew heavily on Johann Gottfried Herder’s ‘expressivist’ philosophy, for example, in order to qualify Kant’s writings about the formal conditions of agency indicated, I would argue, that she was committed to balancing *two* fundamental values that would later become key to understanding her political philosophy. The first of these values,

207 George Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985), 21. For the source of the Gaus extract see footnote 2 above.

208 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 56.

equality, she had already highlighted in relation to grace: she understood from Augustine that all human beings are equally sinners before God. ‘Original kinship’, she had written in her dissertation, was characterised by ‘an equal share in original sin and thus in death’.<sup>209</sup> The second value, ‘plurality’ was, I believe, rooted in her unwillingness to forswear her Jewishness under any circumstances (unlike her ‘friend’ Rahel, for example). Her Jewishness was intrinsic to what made her different, one amongst many, which she subsequently translated into the fundamental observation, expressed in *The Human Condition*, ‘that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.’<sup>210</sup> Consequently, in this chapter, though I am primarily going to consider what Hannah Arendt had to say about Jews and Jewishness, the point is that her conclusions were not exclusive to the Jews but stretched far beyond this providing an insight into her commitment to fundamental values that would eventually occupy centre stage in her mature political writings.

Hannah Arendt’s commitment to both equality and plurality can, I think, be traced to two objections she expressed in the nineteen thirties on Jewish themes. The first objection was to the authority and potency of fundamental Jewish beliefs about biblical election and the coming of a messiah, beliefs generated deep in the Jewish past, which had informed Jewish self-perceptions over generations and the behaviours of many of her fellow Jews still in the early decades of the twentieth century. Her second objection was directed against the attitude of individual Jews, David Friedländer who had lived more than a century earlier, was prominent amongst them. It was Friedländer and others like him who, during the Enlightenment, had renounced their religious heritage entirely and were thus exposed, in Arendt’s judgement, as

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209 Arendt, *LSA*, 107.

210 Arendt, *HC*, 7.



nullities. The substance of Arendt's criticisms seems to amount to this: on the one hand segregation could only be achieved at a price. Social cohesion and the preservation of a collective Jewish identity, a 'tradition-directed social type' or grouping, as Riesman defined it, achieved either through acquiescence in or willing adherence to a set of religious beliefs and modes of behaviour determined long ago, has to be paid for.<sup>211</sup> The price is that of being imprisoned in a 'long present',<sup>212</sup> which has nothing at all, in fact, to do with the actual present, with what is happening now. To be a prisoner of the 'long present' is actually to be trapped in what amounts to an extended past, disengaged, as it were, and isolated from other people. In 'The Enlightenment' paper Arendt referred to 'the Jews' unique sense of life, which [attempts] to hold what is past within the present'.<sup>213</sup> This type of isolation from others was detrimental though, as Arendt knew from reading Kant, because it represented the voluntary relinquishment of relations which would inevitably involve communication with others; and communication with others was itself, vital to thinking, to making judgements. (In the *Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt would develop this argument along political lines accusing wealthy German Jews in the aftermath of the European settlement worked out at the Congress of Vienna, of contriving to maintain their poorer brethren 'in their national isolation, pretending that this separation [wa]s part of their religion', in order to protect their own power and privilege vis-à-vis national governments.<sup>214</sup>) On the other hand, however, to reject one's Jewishness *in toto*, to deny one's own history, as Friedländer had, and to look upon everything peculiar to oneself 'as an impediment to [one's] integration', to one's becoming fully human,

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211 Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*.

212 See footnote 202 above.

213 Arendt, *TJW*, 12.

214 Arendt, *OT*, 33.

risks occupying the world from a non-perspective, dispossessed of a viewpoint necessary for making sense of reality.<sup>215</sup>

The cost to the individual in either case, whether it be through voluntary separation or the absence of a viewpoint, as it were, entails *existential* denial. (Arendt would surely have held this to be true of everybody, not just the Jews, though in her early writings, ‘The Enlightenment’ paper being a case in point, it was still the Jews who were the focus of her attention.) By *existential* denial I mean to suggest being deprived of the intelligibility of experience that comes from being with others as an autonomous individual and being able to communicate with them. Where ‘self-consciousness’ is offered the prospect of ‘substance’ as a result of ‘merely ethical command’, Arendt observed early in her published writings, it, self-consciousness, ‘must always remain vacant’.<sup>216</sup> There can be no sense of an independent will, in other words, where the individual is bound by the formalities of a categorical imperative (she was, in this respect, highly critical of Kant), or where people, for instance the Jews, retreat behind rigidly adhered to religious convictions, customs and wardrobe the possession of which they rely upon to provide a sense of who they are independently of all worldly relations with others. Then again, to go through life as an individual stripped of all that which connects me to my past (as might be thought to be the case in respect of the Enlightenment’s universal man) is to erase ‘the understanding distance’ born of having a unique perspective fundamental to communication and judgement.<sup>217</sup> It would have to wait until her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, of course, for Arendt to describe this ‘understanding distance’ as the achievement of the spectator.

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>216</sup> Arendt, ‘Against Private Circles’, in *TJW*, 20.

<sup>217</sup> Arendt observed that ‘Tolerance corresponds to the understanding distance held by the educated person’, ‘The Enlightenment’, *TJW*, 14.

In its original form, Kant's 'critical philosophy' was, of course, meant to put beyond further dispute the argument that in order for knowledge to be at all possible, there must exist external stimuli, or 'sensible intuitions', which the mind, employing the concepts of space and time in conjunction with a set of twelve categories, can "work on" and process. Without such stimuli there would be nothing, no content, he pointed out, for the concepts and categories to order and unify. Likewise, given that our senses are perpetually, that is, minute by minute, nanosecond by nanosecond in fact, bombarded by external material, we, as rational beings, would be plunged into not just mental disarray and disorientation but, Kant argued, we would be denied all possibility of *experiencing* in any shape or form at all, were we dispossessed of the necessary conceptual apparatus to make out regularities and order from the haphazard and chaotic onslaught of overlapping, incongruous and incoherent stimuli. My contention here is that Arendt recast the crucial Kantian insight that 'intuitions without concepts are blind' employing it to argue that there are areas of experience that will remain inaccessible to us if we render them unintelligible by refusing to engage in the type of discussion about them with others that thinking itself demands.

Of course, I might neither get to walk through the South American Rain Forest nor may I ever have cause to talk to my friends about trips made there by others.

Similarly, I might not expect to taste beluga caviar or sip Dom Perignon champagne and I might be just as unlikely to feel the need to discuss the opinions on fine cuisine held by others. My experience and my understanding may, as a consequence, be all the poorer for these lacuna. However, there are other dimensions of experience whose opaqueness, because of an unwillingness on my part to *interrogate* them as part of

public discourse, threatens far more serious consequences. In the nineteen thirties, for instance, with anti-Semitism and Nazi aggression an ever growing menace, Arendt expressed her ire at those German Jews who looked inwards rather than outwards, as it were, calling for “‘return’” and ‘*teshuva*’ (a ‘taking stock of oneself’) as if all responsibility for what was transpiring belonged to them.<sup>218</sup> In her short essay entitled, ‘The Jewish Question’, written towards the end of the decade she indicated her unconventional and outward looking approach: ‘there was no Jewish question in Germany in 1933’. She continued, ‘which makes it all the more important to ask why in Germany of all places antisemitic slogans held such promise of success and why of all places it was possible in Germany to remove Jews totally from the life of the German nation.’<sup>219</sup> In expressing her views *publicly*, Arendt was thus setting the pattern for a lifetime of thinking and writing, a lifetime spent not ‘entirely private[ly]’ and so not ‘deprived of things essential to a truly human life [or] deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others’.<sup>220</sup> To think, to make intelligible, meant acting *responsibly* (as Hans Jonas might put it), which in turn implied engaging in public discourse with others in the world.<sup>221</sup> Without such public discourse, to which Hannah Arendt began contributing from the 1930s, there could be no understanding.<sup>222</sup>

Arendt’s earliest pieces, including a number of her so-called ‘Jewish Writings’ published in the 1930s, already suggest a concern about precisely the impoverishment of understanding. In *Between Past and Future*, published in 1954, she wanted to

218 Hannah Arendt, ‘The Jewish Question’ in *TJW*, 42–45.

219 *Ibid.*, 45.

220 Arendt, *THC*, 58, emphasis added.

221 See, for example, Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, translated by Hans Jonas with David Herr (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984).

222 Jerome Kohn has edited a book of Hannah Arendt’s essays entitled, *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*. See footnote 2 above.

show by example how intelligibility about what takes place in the world in which we reside might be invigorated if we only undertook the type of ‘exercises in political thinking’ she recommended. In her early writings, Arendt’s discussion focussed more on obstacles to understanding, on the one hand as a result of *Bildung*, for example, or as she described it, ‘formation’ (for nineteenth century German Jews *Bildung* was a very complex idea, a *Weltanschauung*, no less<sup>223</sup>) and on the other the because of Jewish attitudes to the Jewish past.

Since Arendt’s analysis of the Jewish past, Judaism and Jewishness or Jewish identity demand that consideration be given to already existing and frequently contentious debates about what is generally summarised as the ‘Jewish question’, her contribution to these debates, between and amongst Jews and non-Jews, must be assessed, I think, in the context of offerings made by others, including non-Jewish Germans, German-Jewish intellectuals and, in addition, the particular recommendations issuing from within German-Jewish movements for religious reform.<sup>224</sup> My overall approach to unravelling the complexities of the issue indicated here is, however, to estimate the extent to which the allure of Kant’s critical philosophy led Arendt to adopt and adapt, perhaps unconsciously, certain aspects of his more disagreeable thinking in respect of the Jews, in addition to his critical method. I will therefore, be exploring whether Arendt’s often controversial, sometimes cruelly insensitive and heartless comments about Jews and Jewishness were, in fact, an indication of her *susceptibility* in regard to Kant’s anti-Jewish beliefs, beliefs of which she could not have failed to be aware? Of course, contemporary influences should not be discounted in this respect. For instance, Arendt would have been well aware of the self-hating Jewish author, Otto

223 See, for example, George, L Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism*.

224 Some of the contributions were part of the Reform movement, others part of a reforms issuing from the Neo-Orthodox Rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch.

Weininger, who published the best-selling ‘anti-Semitic and “idealist” book’ *Sex and Character*, in 1906. She would also have been familiar with the work of the German Jewish philosopher, Theodor Lessing, who undertook a study of Jewish self-hatred, originally published in 1930 under the title *Der jüdische Selbsthaß*.<sup>225</sup> Here however, given the extent to which Arendt drew on the ‘critical method’, my focus will be on the potential influence Kant’s anti-Semitic beliefs had on her. And, given this influence, the question I want to address is, did Hannah Arendt in fact fall prey to precisely what Rosenzweig had cautioned Jewish intellectuals against, namely ‘apologetic thinking’?<sup>226</sup>

In an ‘Interpretive Essay’ that accompanies Hannah Arendt’s published lectures on Kant’s political philosophy, Ronald Beiner has provided a useful critical assessment of her thoughts on some key ideas, for example, judging, the so-called ‘enlarged mentality’, taste, and the virtues of being a spectator as opposed to an actor, each considered initially by Kant and subsequently developed in Arendt’s mature political thinking. The limitation of Beiner’s analysis and critical remarks, however, is that in common with other commentators he confines himself to analysing and discussing what Arendt *says* about her subject, at the expense of what she neglects to say. This is a significant oversight because what she neglects to say is that Kant’s attitude towards the Jews as expressed in a number of texts among which ‘Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason’ (1793) is a prime example, was filled with abhorrence. One is, in fact, left feeling that with respect to her relationship to Kant, some immensely important aspects of her thinking that are, at the very least, consistent with

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<sup>225</sup> Mack, *German Idealism*, 104.

<sup>226</sup> Rosenzweig actually wrote an essay with this title in which he observed in respect of modern Jewish philosophy that ‘Apologetic thinking remains dependent on the cause, the adversary. And in this sense Jewish thinking remains apologetic thinking’. Cited in Mack, *German Idealism*, 129.

his and quite possibly derive from her detailed reading of his philosophy, have not only been left unarticulated by her and been overlooked by those writing about her, but in being left unarticulated and overlooked represent a hiatus that makes the intelligibility of Arendt's work that much weaker. So, on the one hand we need to consider Arendt's neglect in regard to not discussing Kant's anti-Jewish remarks; on the other we need to be aware of her omission from critical considerations of German-Jewish intellectuals and scholars including, for example, Moses Mendelssohn, Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud who have been discussed precisely in terms of their *reactions* to Kant's anti-Jewish German idealism.<sup>227</sup> How then, is Hannah Arendt's *apparent* silence to be interpreted?

In 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason' and a number of other writings including *Anthropology* and *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), Kant's animosity towards *Judaism* is manifest in terms of the clash between his 'critical philosophy', consonant in his mind with Christianity, which he promoted as fit for a progressive modern nation state, and his dismissal of the outdated beliefs and practices of a primitive people – the Jews – occupying the realm of darkness, tethered immutably to their God and unable to see beyond the immediacy of their *material* being. This animosity, internalised and developed by a number of other prominent German thinkers in a variety of fields – Feuerbach, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Heinrich von Treitschke and Richard Wagner have been cited as examples by Michael Mack – was augmented by Kant's representation of Judaism as a "religion" without religion, merely 'a cult', disabled by a heteronomous fascination with all things material, which served to prevent the Jews from exercising rational judgement.<sup>228</sup> (Interestingly,

227 See Mack, for example, *German Idealism and the Jew*.

228 Kant refers to Judaism as an old cult that 'the teachers of Christianity' sought to replace with a 'pure moral religion'. See 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason' in *RRT*, 156.

Anson Rabinbach describes the German-Jewish intellectuals of the Weimar generation as being in possession of ‘a spiritual radicalism that constituted a Jewishness without doctrinal Judaism’.<sup>229</sup>) This, for Kant, was an impediment to their liberation from what he perceived as their ethical imperfection and put paid to their chances of redemption, something an autonomous, rational-thinking Christian idealist, who was by definition free of all material inclinations, was much better suited to accomplish. Kant’s anti-Jewish discourses, and following him, Hegel’s too, fuelled a debate about *Jewishness* and the treatment and integration of Jews within non-Jewish communities to which both Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers and writers alike had begun contributing since the late eighteenth century. Writing in the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt’s work represents a further contribution to this ‘dialogue’.<sup>230</sup> Such essays as ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’ published in 1932 and ‘Original Assimilation: An Epilogue to the One Hundredth Anniversary of Rahel Varnhagen’s Death’ and ‘Against Private Circles’, both published the following year, are particularly noteworthy Arendtian texts because given the stance Kant took towards the Jews, what Arendt wrote appeared to indicate an *apologetic* dimension.

What do I mean by ‘apologetic’? In contrast to Rosenzweig’s exhortation to his fellow Jews to *challenge* ‘the adversary’s’ anti-Jewish thinking, as he himself had and, in reaction to Kant, Mendelssohn, Freud and Benjamin had too, Hannah Arendt’s emerging *radicalism* gives the impression of her having *internalised* Kant’s animosity. It suggests she might have wanted to reform Judaism as a result.<sup>231</sup> She

229 Anson Rabinbach, ‘Introduction’, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, edited by Gershom Scholem, translated by Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), xxxv.

230 Whether or not, of course, there was, in fact, anything approaching a true dialogue between German Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, and German Jews is something that has, since Scholem’s ‘Against the Myth of a German-Jewish Dialogue’ become a matter of some contention, as discussed above.

231 There is a distinction, nevertheless between Rosenzweig’s and say Freud’s reactions to Kant, because Freud, according to Mack, can be seen to have internalised Kant’s and Hegel’s anti-Jewish criticisms as evidenced by his



seemed, that is, to be almost asking pardon for what were perceived to be Judaism's 'shortcomings'. We may be forgiven then, for thinking that her tributes to Herder's historiography in the 1932 'Enlightenment' paper, for example, masked this internalisation and apologetic posture through implicit recommendations of her own that the Jews should relinquish their past, that Judaism's ties to its God should be dissolved and that the Old Testament's election theology, which identified the Jews as God's 'Chosen People', be abandoned. There seemed to be something Nietzschean, counter-historical, about what Arendt was writing since it was Nietzsche who had provided a description of counter-history as the struggle to overcome the 'aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed [...] crimes' of 'earlier generations' by 'condemn[ing] these aberrations and regard[ing] ourselves as free of them'. In, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', he had observed, for instance, that the most we could hope for was,

to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were *a posteriori*, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate [...].<sup>232</sup>

In 'The Enlightenment' paper Arendt acclaimed Herder's discussion of the Jewish question as this arose out of a treatment of history by 'one of [its] first great interpreters'.<sup>233</sup> She offered a reading of Herder's 1774 essay, 'This too a Philosophy for the Formation of Humanity', in which the author was described as providing an

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'dismissal of priests and ceremonies as being alien to the sentiment of the Jewish people'. *German Idealism*, 129.

<sup>232</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life' in *Untimely Meditations*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 76. Hereafter, this book will be abbreviated *UM*.

<sup>233</sup> Arendt, *The Enlightenment*, 12.

affirmative account of ‘the destruction of the content of [Jewish] history’, something that Arendt welcomed too – because it ‘signals [for the Jews] the loss of all historical ties’.<sup>234</sup> This, she clearly wanted the reader to acknowledge, was a development for the better. (To recall, she had concluded her dissertation by pointing to the advantages of ‘detach[ing] ourselves from human history and from its irrevocable enchainment by generation’.<sup>235</sup> Where her treatment of the Christian concept of grace had highlighted something she estimated was of *deep* historical importance there was the suggestion in relation to her treatment of the Jews that there was nothing that could not be surrendered.) Similarly, Arendt expressed appreciation of Herder’s recognition that ‘well-formed’ Jews, Jews, that is, who understood the importance of *Bildung* or self-improvement through education, are content to renounce their self-perception as the people of God and thereby ‘cast aside proud national prejudice, and abandon customs that do not belong to our age and temperament, or even to our climate, [in order to] work not as slaves [...] but indeed as cohabitants of educated peoples’.<sup>236</sup> In this Arendt seemed, in the early 1930s, to be embracing as well, an orthodox Enlightened vision of the emancipated Jew, one perhaps not so very far removed even, from that which inspired Dohm’s recommendations in his 1781 book *On the Civic Improvement of the Jews*, or Friedländer’s radical proposal for a comprehensive reformation of Judaism as set out, initially, in an open letter, *Sendschreiben*, of 1799, sent to Wilhelm Teller, the chief Protestant provost in Berlin.

Friedländer’s “‘infamous” proposal’, amounted to the offer of what came to be described, somewhat ironically, as ‘dry baptism’.<sup>237</sup> The ideas he had put forward

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234 Ibid., 15.

235 See footnote 201 above.

236 Ibid.

237 Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 44.

involved the Jews crossing the threshold of the Lutheran Church, as it were, ‘on the basis of shared moral values, but without having actually recognized the divinity of Christ and without having formally undergone baptism’.<sup>238</sup> And, the *quid pro quo* for this amounted to the forswearing of some of what were the more rote ceremonial practices within Jewish religious ritual. The proposal was rejected by Teller. In the wake of the rejection, however, Friedländer continued to push for significant alterations to the Jewish liturgy including the renunciation of prayers for a return to Jerusalem and the re-establishment of the ancient temple with its sacrificial culture. Arendt’s vision of the Jew transformed was in some ways quite similar to these proposals. Except that, in contrast to Friedländer and like-minded reformers amongst Prussian Jewry, Arendt was not at all interested in simply questioning the divine authority of Jewish ceremonial laws, updating the worship service, or consigning the study of Hebrew to philology. She was not, that is, a moderniser attempting to make the practice of Judaism, in some sense, fit for the twentieth century. She had, of course, grown up in a liberal German-Jewish household in which religious observance was minimal. While the biblical duty to be a *light* unto others<sup>239</sup> was, it could be argued, not completely alien to her, her sense of responsibility as a Jew was less the product of religious duty and more informed by the sense in which her friend, Walter Benjamin, regarded it as incumbent almost, for Jews to be intellectuals and cultural critics: ‘For me’, Benjamin had declared to Ludwig Strauss in November 1912, ‘Jewishness is not in any sense an end in itself but the noble bearer and representative of the intellect’.<sup>240</sup> Similarly, though her radical vision of the Jew transformed in terms of beliefs and conduct, was much closer to the Enlightened vision of a

238 Amos Elon, *The Pity of it All: A Portrait of Jews in Germany 1743–1933* (London: Penguin, 2004), 73–74.

239 ‘I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles.’ Isaiah 42: 6.

240 Walter Benjamin cited in Steven E. Aschheim, *Beyond the Border: The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 89.

transformation from particularity to ‘pure possibility’, she was all too aware of the limitations, ‘the blind spots’, as she referred to them, of Enlightened thinking.<sup>241</sup> Indeed this was part of her attraction to Herder. He recognised the constraints of the Enlightenment mind, which was only able to think in terms of progress and universalism, while being blind to *history* and alterity. Arendt, concurred recognising the limitations. Consequently, while it is fair to argue that in contrast to Jewish orthodoxy hers was a unique and radically alternative vision of the Jew, it was certainly not, as I shall argue below, a vision of ‘pure possibility’. It did not reflect an acceptance of Enlightenment universalism that dispossessed Judaism of its undeniable *historical* content and the Jews of their exceptionalness. Rather, to recall what I have discussed in relation to Nietzsche, there was in Arendt an emerging commitment to rethinking one’s relationship to the past and identifying a new point of origin, as it were.

Of course, challenges to the very foundations of Judaism (and Christianity) were not new. Spinoza’s seventeenth critique of a transcendent God in his *Ethics* (published in 1677) was perhaps the most revolutionary of these for modern Judaism. The Jewish reformer, Solomon Steinheim, for example, repudiated Spinozism on the grounds that it exemplified pagan tradition. As for Spinoza himself, Michael Meyer reports that Steinheim labelled him as nothing less than ‘the great denier of God in the covenanted people’.<sup>242</sup> In Germany, towards the close of the Enlightenment period, Spinoza’s depiction of the Hebrews, who had received the written law, as being spiritually *immature* enjoyed a significant degree of popularity making it possible for Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his 1784 publication, *The Education of Humanity*, ‘to [clothe] the

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241 Arendt, *The Enlightenment*, 9.

242 Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 69.

established Christian idea of the supersession of the older faith [Judaism] by the younger [Christianity] in a new, historical garment'.<sup>243</sup> Confining ourselves to German-Jewish thinkers and writers in the German states prior to unification and then in unified Germany after 1870, there were many who preceded Arendt by expressing radical ideas about the future development of Judaism. Indeed, Rosenzweig was prompted to write his essay cautioning against 'apologetic thinking' precisely because of a tendency he identified amongst contemporary Jewish philosophers to *concede to* rather than *react against* anti-Jewish criticism. The call for ritual reforms had certainly proceeded unabated, Friedländer's misgivings and disappointments notwithstanding.<sup>244</sup> The new Hamburg temple, for example, dedicated in October 1818, boasted some significant departures from traditional synagogues. Amongst these was the fact that two 'preachers' were now appointed and the position of 'rabbi' was made, literally, redundant. The temple prayerbook unusually contained both Hebrew and German texts 'and the volume untraditionally opened from left to right'.<sup>245</sup> Of perhaps even greater import, was the fact that, echoing proposals called for by Friedländer some years earlier in Berlin, it was now considered permissible to alter sections of the prayerbook that spoke of a return to Zion. Michael Meyer observes in regard to the changes and omissions undertaken: 'The Hamburg reformers had not lost their love of Zion, nor did they fail to recognize its significant role in Jewish history. But they did not hope or desire to return there themselves or to rebuild the ancient temple'.<sup>246</sup>

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243 Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 64.

244 Meyer reports that Friedländer and his family eventually stopped attending even revised worship services after 1815 because he felt that too many accommodations had been made 'with the traditionalists'. Ibid., 45.

245 Ibid., 56.

246 Ibid.

A little under two decades later, the Jews of the Berlin Reform Congregation were themselves prepared to take the radical step of formalising their misgivings about *election*. The prayerbook of 1844 stated:

[T]he concept of holiness and of a special vocation arising from this has become entirely foreign to us, as has the idea of an intimate covenant between God and Israel which is to remain significant for all eternity. Human character and dignity, and God's image within us – these alone are signs of chosenness.<sup>247</sup>

Such ritual ceremonial and liturgical reforms were complemented and underpinned by new theological conceptions of Judaism emanating from a number of Jewish thinkers and rabbis including, for example, Solomon Steinheim (1789-1866), Solomon Formstecher (1808-1889) and Samuel Hirsch (1815-1889). Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), who was in no sense a member of the Reform movement, was, nevertheless, the founder of a *counter*-movement for *reform*, namely, Neo-Orthodoxy; and, Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), though not the initiator of the reforms of the Reform movement is regarded, nonetheless, as the movement's true 'founding father'. The fine details that distinguish their various positions aside,<sup>248</sup> what (each of) these individuals had in common was that, in responding to the times, that is, in responding to the external pressures of modernity as these were reflected through the Enlightenment, they sought to preserve their religion by initiating changes from *within* Judaism itself. However, there were also differences that broadly distinguished the proponents of change. On the one hand they were all reacting to the perceived threats to Judaism's continued viability should civic improvement lead to further assimilation prompting, as a possible consequence, increases in conversions. (In her

247 Cited in, Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 8.

248 Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, provides detailed and valuable accounts of all of these thinkers and writers.

first major political work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt re-assessed the grounds upon which such fears about the survival of the Jews had been supported observing ‘that the converted Jew only rarely left his family and even more rarely left his Jewish surroundings altogether’. She went on to conclude, that ‘the Jewish family, at any rate, proved to be a more conserving force than Jewish religion’.<sup>249</sup>) Then again, there was the fear of the increasing intellectual isolation of Judaism confronted, as it was, by new and Enlightened thinking about history, science and philosophy. In this respect Geiger, for instance, recognised Christianity ‘was reshaping itself to become the religion of modern society’ leaving Judaism trailing woefully behind.<sup>250</sup> On the other hand, some reformists, the Neo-Orthodox Samson Raphael Hirsch, for example, were disturbed by the attractiveness to young Jewish intellectuals (this from around the second decade of the nineteenth century onwards), of the empirical study of the Jewish religion and culture known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. This trend had grown out of the ‘Society for Culture and Scientific Study of the Jews’ founded in Berlin in 1819, of which Leopold Zunz was a leading member. Those drawn to such studies demonstrated a particular appreciation for history and historical criticism. Reformists could exploit this, of course, to legitimise changes to the religion by pointing to precedents in earlier times. And it was precisely for this reason that Samson Raphael Hirsch rejected such studies, whose investigations threatened to undermine what had traditionally been understood as the revealed, and therefore timeless, word of God. In contrast, in an endnote to the concluding paragraph of Arendt’s ‘Enlightenment’ paper, she refers to Zunz, having already observed in the text that ‘history emerges as a special and legitimate concern of the Jews’.<sup>251</sup>

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249 Hannah Arendt, *OT*, 64.

250 Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 91.

251 Arendt, ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’, 16.

Amongst the most eminent of Enlightenment thinkers, it was Immanuel Kant, as already mentioned, who penned particularly deep-seated feelings of aversion towards the Jews in a number of his writings. The reforms that were prescribed by those especially on the Reform wing of modern Judaism sometimes reflected attempts to correct the false impressions Kant was perceived to have had of Judaism. However, it was the reformists' 'adoption of so much that the Königsberg philosopher pointed to as being not Jewish and stressing its centrality within their own self-definition' that was ironic given the desire to initiate change from within.<sup>252</sup> For example, Meyer reports how the apotheosis of morality in Kantian philosophy was reflected in the importance that Jewish reformers began to attach to their sermons as a means by which to preach not so much about 'ceremonial law [as] virtuous conduct in business or family relationships'.<sup>253</sup> More ironic still, and an indication of just how short-sighted many reformers were, was the fact that they failed to realise that either way Kant would still have had no truck with their religion, reforms or no reforms, such was the robustness of his antipathy as dictated by his understanding of the conditions required for moral improvement.

Kant's sense of purpose in writing what was to be the first of his three *Critiques* was expressed, vigorously in the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. 'In this enquiry', he confidently stated, 'I have made completeness my chief aim, and I venture to assert that there is not a single metaphysical problem which has not been solved, or for the solution of which the key at least has not been supplied'.<sup>254</sup> In order to achieve his ambition Kant directed his criticisms here at the work of two other philosophers. The first, was the rationalist G. W. Leibniz, author of numerous

<sup>252</sup> Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 65.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Kant, *CPR*, Axiii, 10.



fragments as well as, *The Principles of Nature and of Grace* (1718) and the *Monadology* (1720), who had died in 1716; the other, was the Scottish Enlightenment empiricist, David Hume, who had passed away just five years prior to the publication of the first *Critique*. Kant, in fact, had great respect for the Leibnizian system, which, after meeting with initial coolness had, under Frederick the Great, become ‘the orthodox metaphysics of the German Enlightenment’.<sup>255</sup> Kant’s main target was actually Hume’s scepticism but in responding to this he was also aroused to weaknesses within the Leibnizian system in which he had been raised. The first *Critique* is, therefore, critical of both Hume and Leibniz. At the heart of its author’s investigation, as I have previously discussed, was the question of the status of our knowledge of the world around us. And in summary, as we have seen, Kant’s position was that all that we can *reasonably* expect to claim knowledge of is limited to the phenomena, the objects, that is, with which we are confronted on a daily basis. Contrary to Hume, Kant emphasised that the conditions of the possibility of understanding make *reason* a necessity: without concepts, after all, our intuitions would be blind. However, contrary to Leibniz, Kant emphasised the importance of what *empirical* discovery brings to understanding: concepts, without intuitions, would simply be empty.

It was the nature of Kant’s critical method, which comprised not so much a middle way between dogmatism and scepticism as a response to and departure from both, that appealed to Arendt and about which she spoke so favourably in her 1970 lectures. Throughout her writings generally, she made much of the idea that the claims of philosophy must be relatively modest, that philosophy is best suited to

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<sup>255</sup> Roger Scruton, *Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 13.

‘communicating’, not to presenting results or attempting to discover *the* ‘Truth’. Truth she held, is something that can only be known to God. Philosophy, in balancing the abstract against the concrete (the conceptual against the empirical), must be prepared to settle for less than Truth, something which is at times perhaps too easily satisfied. Our commitment should rather be to *truthfulness*, which is ever demanding in that it requires us to question and to revise without satisfaction. By the mid-1940s then, she was arguing that thanks, especially, to Jaspers, we have come to recognise that philosophy, liberated from the burden of disclosing ‘Truth’ can, at last, allow itself to engage in ‘playful metaphysics’, never ceasing experimentation, the ‘never fixed representation of definite movements of thought’.<sup>256</sup> However, while Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena had, on the one hand radical epistemological implications as a consequence of setting limits to what we can justifiably claim to *know* about the world around us, on the other hand, it also seemed to offer the audacious prospect of releasing human reason from a dependency upon either the mundane, or for that matter, the extra-mundane.

Under a system of government in which the sovereignty of numerous German princes was frequently underwritten not only by their being the head of the church in their respective *Länder*, but, additionally, as a result of the buttressing of their dominions by the “proofs” of God’s existence proffered by so many of the German Enlightenment’s rationalist thinkers, Kant’s critical despatch was unlikely to reinforce confidence in their rule – not least because of the inference that theoretical knowledge of the Divine could no longer be taken as an unquestioned assumption. However, if as a consequence of Kantianism, the foundations of princely rule suddenly appeared a

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256 Arendt, ‘What is Existenz Philosophy?’, 52–53.

little less secure than before, the rational individual was at least recognised as now having the potential to form independent judgements with a degree of confidence not previously experienced in a world no longer underwritten by reason alone. Or so it seemed. Certainly, the everyday material distractions to which each of us is predisposed, and the ‘vices of *culture*’, which at their egregious extreme Kant described as engendering ‘diabolical vices’, could, given the Kantian transcendental paradigm, be prevented from getting in the way of the autonomous individual freely exercising their judgements.<sup>257</sup> Given the ‘right conditions’, autonomous reason would display itself in terms of a transcendental disregard for empirical objects. Kant’s recourse to autonomous reason though, was a denial that metaphysics, as traditionally understood, any longer ‘mediated between immanence and transcendence in a way that assured a meaningful relation between humanity and its place in nature’.<sup>258</sup> It was an argument in favour of viewing the natural contingent everyday world surrounding us as simply very basic malleable material for manufacturing ‘a new rational world that gradually progresses toward immanent perfection’.<sup>259</sup> The trouble with all this was that with the opportunities now opened up for creating better, in the sense of more stable, more rationally organised societies, there loomed the question as to what would become of those elements of existing society that were not deemed to fit into the Kantian picture of transcendental bliss and harmony. One such *element*, it appeared to Kant, comprised of the Jews.

Kant was critical of the Jews both in terms of their religion and in terms of their existence as a community or nation. In terms of Judaism as religion, among the very few more ‘generous’ concessions he permitted himself to make was the one already

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<sup>257</sup> Kant, *RRTh*, 75.

<sup>258</sup> Mack, *German Idealism*, 26.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

referred to above that reduced Judaism's status to merely 'an old cult' which 'the teachers of Christianity' sought to replace with a 'new faith' – one representing 'a pure moral religion'.<sup>260</sup> A couple of pages prior to this remark in 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason', he was, however, keen to point out 'that the *Jewish* faith stands in absolutely no essential connection, i.e. in no unity of concepts, with the ecclesiastical faith whose history we want to consider, even though it immediately preceded it and provided the physical occasion for the founding of this church (Christianity)'.<sup>261</sup> His animosity towards the Jews, which, in Michael Mack's judgement<sup>262</sup> was surprisingly lacking in reflection for a philosopher of Kant's importance and standing and was not very well thought through, was expressed in several different places and on several levels. Kant argued, for example, that Judaism was a religion that utterly lacked religious faith. In contrast to Christianity, which he viewed as a pure moral religion, one of his criticisms of Judaism in 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason', was that the Jewish 'God [...] wills obedience to commands for which absolutely no improvement of moral disposition is required' meaning the believer 'cannot truly be that moral being we find necessary for a religion'.<sup>263</sup> Indeed, a house of God should be the place in which the individual receives instruction that is aimed precisely at moral improvement. In fact, it was these criticisms that weighed particularly heavily with Jewish reformers, often characterising both their writings and the sermons that were now being delivered to their congregations on a more regular basis than traditionally had been the case. Then again, Kant criticised Judaism for not being a religion in the true sense: 'Strictly speaking Judaism is not a religion at all but simply the union of a number of

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260 Kant, 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason' in *RRT*, 156.

261 Ibid., 154.

262 Mack, *German Idealism*.

263 Kant, *RRT*, 156.

individuals who, since they belonged to a particular stock, established themselves into a community under purely political laws, hence not into a church'.<sup>264</sup>

In Kant's 'defence', and contra Mack, who as suggested above, expresses 'disappointment' with the philosopher for having failed to think differently, it needs to be noted that the content and vociferousness of Kant's anti-Jewish arguments were not particularly out of the ordinary given the way Jews were generally perceived even in educated and intellectual circles at the time. This is not to try and exonerate or excuse Kant, but simply to put his anti-Jewish arguments into context. Christian von Dohm, for example, of whom mention has already been made, was a middle-ranking bureaucrat in Frederick II's administration and an acquaintance of Mendelssohn. His call for measures that would *improve* the civic status of the Jews were quite daring for the times and, indeed, his proposals caused something of a stir. Yet, Elon reports that he was apparently not beyond referring to Jews as his 'circumcised brethren' and was ready to acknowledge that they 'might be more *verdorben* [morally corrupted] than other nations and even guilty of relatively more misdemeanors than Christians' merely by virtue of being Jewish.<sup>265</sup> In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt refers to Karl Wilhelm Grattenauer, an educated man, a jurist and publicist, in fact, whose 1791 publication, *On the Physical and Moral Constitution of Today's Jew: The Voice of a Cosmopolite*, though not widely read at the time, harangued the Jews of Berlin and warned against their growing influence and, of all wrongdoings, their 'hunger for education'.<sup>266</sup> After its reissue just over a decade on from its first publication, the same pamphlet had to be banned by the Prussian authorities, Elon tells us, because it

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>265</sup> Christian von Dohm, cited in Elon, *The Pity of it All*, 59.

<sup>266</sup> Arendt, *OT*, 61.

generated such an inflamed debate.<sup>267</sup> Michael Meyer meanwhile, reports that Solomon Formstecher, the Reformer referred to above, ‘remembered from his own university years at Giessen that what he was taught in the lecture hall about Judaism was derisive, emotionally biased toward Christianity, and grossly in contradiction with his own conception and first-hand experience of his faith’.<sup>268</sup>

Arguably, the most significant and damning criticism that Kant levelled at Judaism involved not just describing it in terms of an obsession with the material world (in contrast he viewed Christianity as essentially spiritual), but in actually associating Judaism’s materialism with an ever present ‘evil principle’. This ‘evil principle’, Kant believed, has been locked in moral combat with the principle of good since the appearance of ‘an envoy of heavenly origin’ (are we to take this to be a reference to Jesus?) on earth.<sup>269</sup> This surely reflected the disdain showed towards Jewish money lenders throughout history on the grounds that money was frequently seen as the root of all evil. With respect to the ongoing battle between the principles of good and evil for ‘dominion *over minds*’, the Jews were, according to Kant, so absorbed ‘in their [own] minds [with] no other incentive except the goods of this world and only [the wish], therefore, to be ruled through rewards and punishments in this life’ that they make ‘no substantial injury to the realm of darkness but only serv[e] to keep ever in remembrance the imprescriptible right of the first proprietor’.<sup>270</sup> Kant did not acknowledge, however, that money lending was one of the few professions the Jews were permitted to engage in by Christians. God’s envoy pointed the way to victory over the principle of evil, and those who wish to imitate him must, ‘like him, choose

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267 Elon, *Pity of it All*, 98.

268 Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 70.

269 Kant, *RRT*, 118–26.

270 Ibid.

to die to everything that holds them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality'.<sup>271</sup> (Arendt discussed this in relation to the concept of *caritas* in her dissertation. And in her commentary on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, which I turn to in the next chapter, the poet can be seen to have suggested that, in order to have any chance of being noticed by the angels men would need to demonstrate love of a similarly pure nature.) However, it was Kant's estimation that the Jews could simply not see beyond the original responsibility with which humans had been charged by God, namely to look after 'the goods of the earth'. It was this responsibility and this one alone, to which they adhered at the expense of all others, and it was this, he believed further, that made their very being so very reprehensible.

Amos Elon reports that 'Kant permitted a few young Jews to attend his philosophy seminars in Königsberg as non-matriculated students. They could graduate only if they converted'.<sup>272</sup> In fact, it was Kant's hope that all Jews would eventually *disappear* as a result of 'adopt[ing] publicly the religion of *Jesus*'. The 'euthanasia of Judaism', as he unfortunately put it in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (though arguably, still with more sensitivity than demonstrated in either Fichte's brutal call to 'cut their [the Jews'] heads off one night', or Fries' chilling demand for the eradication of Judaism, 'root and branch'), would, for Kant, be the realisation of 'pure moral religion, freed from all the ancient statutory teachings'.<sup>273</sup> His anti-Jewish writings, born of what Mack defines as 'pseudotheological' thinking put to work for secular purposes, attracted the attention of a number of German thinkers including Fichte,

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271 Ibid.

272 Elon, *The Pity of it All*, 25.

273 Immanuel Kant, 'The Conflict of the Faculties', in *RRT*, 275–6. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) and Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773–1843) cited in Elon, *The Pity of it All*, 25. Fries was a professor of philosophy and elementary mathematics at Heidelberg in the early decades of the nineteenth century. He was author of an inflammatory pamphlet entitled, *On the Endangerment of the Prosperity and Character of the Germans by the Jews*, which was seized by the authorities. He was not typical of university professors of the time.

Schopenhauer and Wagner who developed his line of reasoning for their own purposes. In contrast to Kant, their theses were often blatantly *anti-Semitic*. In this context it is therefore also important to recognise that what Kant envisaged amounted to something approaching an evolutionary process whereby the Jews would, not because of any violence used against them but as the result of a type of moral and intellectual and certainly bloodless natural selection, ultimately vanish. All the same, Kant's beliefs understandably provoked a number of reactions from German Jewish writers many of whose texts Mack has subjected to detailed examination in *German Idealism and the Jew*.

One notable omission from the line-up of those Mack interprets as having crafted either 'counternarratives' or 'counterhistories' as ripostes to Kant is Hannah Arendt. Given what I have suggested about the influence of Kant on Arendt, should this come as any surprise? Perhaps not. Perhaps her omission was precisely because Mack did not feel that her work qualified as anything more than an apologetic response to Kant. If this was his reason it reflects an error of judgement, though: while Benjamin's reaction to Kant was, as Mack makes clear, transcendental in nature and Freud's psychological, Arendt's was surely, initially empirical/historical and subsequently, that is, from the nineteen fifties onwards, ontological. Latterly, it was based on an exploration of the existential conditions according to which Arendt believed life on earth had been gifted to men. Her championing of the concept of pluralism and her enthusiasm for a material world, Kant would have rejected, appear to constitute a basis for arguing that her thinking, too, was essentially reactive to the anti-Jewish elements of Kant's thought, as reactive, in fact, as Rosenzweig's or Freud's. Except that, all this, while consistent with her *mature* political thinking, indicates nothing



about her stance in the 1930s? With reference to her paper on ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’, for example, we must ask whether she was actually conceding, at least implicitly, Kant’s anti-Jewish criticisms without any challenge at all. So, was she, in the nineteen thirties at least, little more than an apologist for the philosopher? Did she, perhaps, only change her mind about Kant later in life?

The short response to these questions is ‘no’. Arendt’s writings, to be sure, suggest a complex relationship with Kantian thinking but she was no apologist for the Königsberg philosopher. On the one hand, it can be demonstrated that her mature writings represent a ‘counternarrative’ based upon the importance she attached to embracing the materiality of a world deemed crucial to a proper understanding of man and his relationship to his environment. And that ‘counternarrative’ clearly challenged Kant’s anti-Jewish thinking on the basis of the importance he himself attached, in the first *Critique*, to the material world as the source of intuitions. On the other hand, again in her later writing, Arendt seems to have also flirted with Kant’s anti-materialistic separation of nature from freedom as demonstrated by her rigid division between the private and public realms in her analysis of the human condition. This led her to sanitize the latter of its association with all matters administrative, economic, social, or welfare related. The segregation was so unyielding, in fact, that Jürgen Habermas reflected in disbelief on her ‘curious perspective’ as follows:

[...] a state which is relieved of the administrative processing of social problems; a politics which is cleansed of socio-economic issues; an institutionalization of public liberty which is independent of the organization of public wealth; a radical democracy which inhibits its liberating efficacy at the boundaries where political oppression

ceases and social repression begins – this path is unimaginable for any modern society.<sup>274</sup>

How are we to make sense of Arendt then? The key, I think, lies in the concerns expressed already in her very earliest writings about the possibilities of *being with others*. These concerns were just as evident, as I will now go on to argue, in her 1932 essay on ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’ as they were in her subsequent work, except that in 1932 it was the fact of being Jewish while being with others that became the central focus of her attention. Her treatment of Jewishness and Judaism in the nineteen thirties, influenced by Herder and reactive to Kant’s anti-Jewish inclinations, prefigured her discussion of pluralism, I think, more than two decades later.

‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’, was a paper in which Arendt discussed the shortcomings of Enlightenment thinking, its ‘blind spots’, as she referred to them.<sup>275</sup> These ‘blind spots’ manifested themselves in relation to Enlightened perceptions of the Jews, who for their part in Arendt’s estimation were, ironically, content to accept the judgement that they were an eternally oppressed people whose misfortune it had been throughout their history in the Diaspora to be the victims of hostility and ill-treatment at the hands of their host communities. In a sense, Arendt would later observe in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ‘the assumption of eternal antisemitism’ was a ‘consoling idea’ given that in modern times ‘great parts of the Jewish people were [...] threatened by [...] dissolution from within’ as much as ‘physical extinction from without’. The unexpected logical implication of eternal anti-

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274 Jürgen Habermas, ‘Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power’ in *Social Research* 44 (1977): 3–24, 15.

275 Arendt, ‘The Enlightenment’, *TJW*, 9.

Semitism was, of course, ‘an eternal guarantee of Jewish existence’.<sup>276</sup> Young-Bruehl correctly observes, it was Herder who in ‘The Enlightenment’ paper ‘emerge[d] as Arendt’s hero’.<sup>277</sup> He attracted Arendt because of his departure from mainstream Enlightened thinking regarding the status attached to reason itself, which he, in contradistinction to Lessing and Mendelssohn, made subject to the vicissitudes of history. With Herder, Arendt observed, ‘[t]he rule of reason, of man who has come of age and is on his own, is about to end’.<sup>278</sup> As far as she was concerned this did not represent a backward step. If anything, it provided an opportunity to release the Jews from the role they were acknowledged to have played throughout history as purely a persecuted minority.

Herder’s respect for the Jews was clear to Arendt. He did not deny their history as a persecuted race nor did he seek to trivialise their long held religious beliefs. ‘Herder understands the history of the Jews’, she wrote, ‘in the same way that they interpret it, as the history of God’s chosen people.’ She went on, ‘[he] recognises that their history arises out of the Law of Moses and cannot be separated from it, and therefore stands or falls with obedience to the Law’.<sup>279</sup> Given the strength of their religious convictions though, despite the threat of dissolution from within, the conundrum for Enlightenment thinkers was how to assimilate the Jews into German society. This could actually be broken down into two distinct if related issues both of which were intimately connected to Herder’s challenge to orthodox Enlightenment ideas. The first issue was one for the German people themselves. Herder did not share the idea that the Jews should abandon their history or abjure their religious beliefs in the pursuit of

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<sup>276</sup> Arendt, *OT*, 7.

<sup>277</sup> Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 93.

<sup>278</sup> Arendt, ‘The Enlightenment’, *TJW*, 12.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.

the Enlightenment dream of ‘pure possibility’ and universalism, that is, in compliance with the purely formal conditions of agency described by Kant. This was though, precisely what Arendt judged Friedländer and his like would have been only too ready to sign up to. The political problem for the German nation, amounted then, to working out how it could assimilate a people whose ‘foreignness’ was not, contra to Kant’s hopes, about to disappear. As Mosse notes, the emancipation of German Jewry under the Wilhelminian Empire and certainly in the first decade following the foundation of the Weimar Republic made tangible advances.<sup>280</sup> Only in the late nineteen twenties, as already intimated above, did things begin to break down when the ‘Jewish question’ came to the fore once again with calamitous consequences.

The second issue relating to the assimilation of German Jewry concerned the Jews themselves, their self-understanding as Jews and their perception of what it means to be Jewish amongst other people. Herder’s ‘expressivist’ respect for the distinctness of the Jews notwithstanding (his defence, that is, of the idea of becoming who you are), his vision was of their refraining from thinking of themselves as the *chosen* people and forsaking modes of behaviour and religious customs not befitting ‘our age and temperament’.<sup>281</sup> This did not imply however, that he concluded the Jewish past be consigned to some sort of historical dustbin or that the Jews should erase every trace of religious practice from the way they behaved. Quite the contrary since in a sense, it seems, he was prefiguring the Hamburg reformers mentioned above who, as Meyer indicates, recognised the enormous significance of certain aspects of their religion in contributing to the expression of who they were even though they themselves did not wish to promote these aspects. It is clear that Hannah Arendt believed Herder’s vision

280 Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, 21.

281 Arendt, ‘The Enlightenment’, *TJW*, 15. In talking of ‘expressivism’ I am following Charles Taylor’s spelling here. See, for example, his *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

put paid to the stereotypical perception, including the self-perception, of the Jews as helpless and persecuted victims while at the same time it helped in retrieving and lending legitimacy, once again, to the Jewish people's own sense of their past.

Reading Arendt's paper on 'The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question', it appears their sense of the past, snatched back from the future-directed Enlightened mind, fixated as it was upon the ideas of progress, pure possibility and universalism, was arguably the most generous of gifts that Herder could have bestowed upon the Jews. '[...] in an oddly indirect way', she remarked, 'Herder gave the Jews back their history'.<sup>282</sup> Remembering the past, served, in at least one existential sense, a similar function in Arendt's overall "critique of political judgement" to Kant's concepts of space and time in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant, it was the instantaneous exercise of the concepts in conjunction with the spontaneous application of the categories of understanding that made it possible for a rational being to sense phenomena in an ordered and unified way. For Arendt, being aware of one's past was the condition that made possible a perspective. And it was a perspective, a point of view, from which an individual's judgements in the present derived. Without a perspective, political judgement would not, on Arendt's account be possible at all. Enlightened thinking, which was committed to a universal man, to all intents and purposes, turned its back on perspective.

However, I think Arendt was suggesting more than this and I think further that it is Walter Benjamin who can, again, assist us here. It seems to me that it was his idea of the explosive flash as past and *present* collide (remember, Arendt wrote of the

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282 Ibid., 14.

significance of lived experience), that brings, to use his terminology, dialectics to a standstill in a sudden ‘cessation of happening’. It is the remembered fragment’s of genuine history, *Geschichte*, in collision with lived experience *now* that, for Benjamin, produced a split second of recognition and understanding, ‘a momentary “constellation”, pregnant with meaning and “now-time”’ (*Jetztzeit*). For Arendt this collision led, for instance, to the illuminating if somewhat less frenetic realisation about the fundamentally (anti-) *political* significance of totalitarianism.<sup>283</sup> ‘Finally, it dawned on me’, she wrote, ‘that I was not engaged in writing an historical book [*The Origins of Totalitarianism*], even though large parts of it clearly contain historical analyses, but a political book’.<sup>284</sup> It would take some years for these ideas to mature, of course. Hannah Arendt was, I think, alluding to them when she wrote about the gap between past and future, for example, which she sketched as a ‘small track of non-time which the activity of thought beats within the time-space of mortal men and into which the trains of thought, of remembrance and anticipation, save whatever they touch from the ruin of historical and biographical time’.<sup>285</sup> In the nineteen thirties Benjamin had not fully worked out the basis for these ideas. However, I think that their influence can be detected in Arendt’s writings and certainly her early work demonstrates a tendency to be moving in a direction consistent with them.

Already from the 1930s then, it is clear that for Hannah Arendt any attempt to deny the past was tantamount to putting in jeopardy the very chances of formulating judgements from a distinct perspective that might facilitate understanding. That was why she gave short shrift to Friedländer for whom, she commented, ‘the distinction between reason and history no longer served to salvage the Jewish religion, but was

283 Handelman, *Fragments of Experience*, 118.

284 See footnote 374 below.

285 Arendt, *BPF*, 13.

merely the means by which to be rid of it as quickly as possible'.<sup>286</sup> In an essay written in 1933 and entitled, 'Against Private Circles' in which she counselled against the establishment of a purely Jewish education system in Nazi Germany, she remarked:

The coming generation must know the *history of Jewish assimilation* and of *antisemitism* as well as it knows the history of Judaism up until assimilation. Only in this way can they be provided with a basis from which to judge their environment and themselves in a genuinely *reasonable* way.<sup>287</sup>

Herein were the roots of her subsequent commitment to pluralism.

Like Herder, Arendt was critical of Enlightenment thinkers (and the Jews who unquestioningly followed them) who asserted that Jewish integration into German society would be the product of a total renunciation of the Jewish past and religious beliefs accompanied by a comprehensive education involving immersion in the German classics and the embrace of reason all in the name of universalism. This would surely only result in the very euthanasia of the Jews for which Kant, who had described the conditions for formal agency alone, had hoped. (As Charles Taylor has observed, Herder's expressivism 'can be seen as a protest against the mainstream Enlightenment view of man – as both subject and object of an objectifying scientific analysis.'<sup>288</sup>) Neither reason nor *Bildung* was actually the answer to integration, Arendt argued. In her biography of Rahel Varnhagen she observed, '[t]he Enlightenment raised Reason to the status of an authority. It declared thought and what Lessing called "self-thinking", which anyone can engage in alone and of his own accord, the supreme capacities of man'.<sup>289</sup> But, she continued caustically, 'self-thinking [...]

<sup>286</sup> Arendt, 'The Enlightenment', *TJW*, 9.

<sup>287</sup> Arendt, 'Against Private Circles', *TJW*, 20. Emphases in original.

<sup>288</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, 1.

<sup>289</sup> Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 90.

provides a foundation for cultivated ignoramus. Being by birth exempt from obligation to any object in their alien cultural environment, they need merely, in order to become contemporaries, peel off old prejudices and free themselves for the business of thinking'.<sup>290</sup> In her 'Enlightenment' paper she made the following point, in relation to Herder:

Herder reserves his sharpest polemic for the Enlightenment's concept of formation – that is, thinking for oneself – which he castigates above all else for lacking any sense of reality. Such formation does not arise out of any experience or lead to "action," [sic] to its "application to life within a given sphere." It cannot form man, since it forgets the reality out of which he comes and in which he stands.<sup>291</sup>

Understanding, that is, requires content, it requires experience (Kant's intuitions), which provides food for thought. Unlike Kant, however, experience in Arendt's existential adaptation of his ideas was not envisaged as something that could be described in purely formal terms; it is intimately bound up, she thought, with the expression of who one is, which is undeniably part of one's past. For the Jews, as for any people, indeed any individual, it is the past that provides the undeniable context for expressing who one is. A *sense* of the past though, is not the same as being *ruled* by history whereby one's beliefs or behaviours, now are *determined*, for instance, by 'faith in chosenness and a Messianic hope'.<sup>292</sup> A sense of the past rather, keeps history at a 'distance', as it were, so that understanding can take place. To permit history to absorb us, to allow it to become too "close" to us, risks obscuring 'that trans-temporal moment of "now-time"'<sup>293</sup> that connects memory with the present.

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290 Ibid.

291 Ibid., *TJW*, 13.

292 Arendt, *OT*, 7.

293 Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, 152.



We may then, I believe, draw at least the following two conclusions. First, that Hannah Arendt was not an apologist for Kant in respect of his more objectionable remarks concerning the Jews, but secondly, that her own criticisms of the Jews and her understanding of what it meant to her to be Jewish certainly drew, quite significantly, on Kantian philosophy. However, this conceded, she was influenced by Herder's expressivist philosophy too, which she employed to qualify the clinical formality of Kantianism. In the 1930s she demonstrated that, like Herder, she did not think the Jews should any longer consider themselves chosen, but, she believed they should not forget their history either, lest they risk total self-disfigurement. History, she thought, put the Jews 'into a position of exceptionality that could still remain hidden during the Enlightenment'.<sup>294</sup> (The Jews represented for her a type of case-study in relation to the conditions of pluralism.) History, that is, disclosed the very differences that the Enlightened mind was prepared to relinquish in pursuit of universal man. So, we are left with an understanding of Judaism very much in tune with the way Arendt viewed herself as a Jew. Indeed, she believed that, in the wake of the second generation of assimilationists associated with Friedländer, the 'Jewish Question' had become as much a personal question, that each individual Jew had to address, as it was a question demanding 'broad[er] types of solutions'.<sup>295</sup> She lived therefore, without the comfort, inspiration and solace that faith in religious doctrine can supply but was not reduced to a nullity or made nondescript as a result. She was not a religious Jew, but in desiring a Jewish funeral service including Kaddish when her non-Jewish husband, Heinrich Blücher, died, it was not longing or regret she was expressing but rather her/their difference, her/their personal exceptionality that she was reinforcing, in much the same way that a yarmulka, ironically, worn in a public

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<sup>294</sup> Arendt, 'The Enlightenment', *TJW*, 16.

<sup>295</sup> Arendt, 'Original Assimilation', *TJW*, 23.

place by a *non-orthodox* Jew is not ironic at all but is meant also as a symbolic demonstration of his alterity. For Arendt, to renounce one's past was as much an evasion of one's responsibility to address the problems of the *present* by engaging in public discourse from a unique perspective as was the refusal to distance oneself from the clutches of history in which one simply permitted oneself to disappear, much like being swallowed up by mass society.

It was not purely a consideration of the Jews and Jewishness that preoccupied her in the nineteen thirties, however. In a commentary on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, written in 1930, two years before 'The Enlightenment' paper, Arendt considered religiosity in more general terms. Was it even possible to be religious at all in the modern world, was the question. After all, was it not the case that God was dead? The commentary, to which I now turn, is important, I think, because Arendt not only considered the poet's answers to these questions, but in doing so her interpretation generated ideas, that, once again, very much concerned *being with others*. Furthermore, the ideas she first expressed in the commentary would turn out to be crucial to understanding her political philosophy three decades later.

## CHAPTER 4

## Fatherless

*When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,  
I alone beweeep my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries [...].*  
William Shakespeare<sup>296</sup>

*Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders?*  
Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>297</sup>

*In Rilke, [...] nothingness is neither the human being's  
nothingness before God, nor meaninglessness (being without  
God); it is, rather, being human, insofar as a being of this kind  
is not at home in the world and finds no entrance into it.*  
Hannah Arendt<sup>298</sup>

In Act II, Scene 2 of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer-Prize winning play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, an angel comes down through a ceiling and materialises in front of one of the main protagonists, Prior Walter. Residing in New York during the mid-1980s and portrayed by the playwright as simply an unassuming and modest sometime club designer and caterer, Walter is dying of AIDS. Enormous strains are being put upon his relationship with Louis, his male partner, as a result of this terminal illness. The first visitation by the angel is made just after Louis has walked out and deserted his partner at this time of heightened anxiety and personal crisis. Described as no less than 'four divine emanations [...] manifest in One', the angel challenges what many of us may have come to imagine about such messengers.<sup>299</sup> After all, it has descended to earth not as a godsend (for instance, the

296 William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 29', in *Tragedies and Poems*, edited by Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1958), 449.

297 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, translated by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (London: The Hogarth Press, 1963), 25.

298 Hannah Arendt, 'Rilke's *Duino Elegies*' in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, edited by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), 23. Emphasis in original. Hereafter this book will be abbreviated *RLC*. Emphasis in original.

299 Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 2003), 9.

Hebrew for ‘angel’, *malach*, indicates a ‘messenger’<sup>300</sup>), not in order to deliver a divine injunction but, rather, to announce God’s having taken leave of Heaven. God, the angel despairingly informs Walter, has disappeared; He is nowhere to be found. He set off one day in 1906, 18 April to be precise, the day of the great earthquake that rocked San Francisco, and He has not been seen since. Humankind has been abandoned.

Kushner acknowledges an intellectual debt to Walter Benjamin in the play’s ‘Afterword’. With the AIDS epidemic forming the backdrop, this is a play which offers ‘gay men in the midst of plague an occasion [...] to interrogate what it means to be part of a community in these difficult times’ – referring to the two Reagan administrations. And Kushner undertakes this by employing a strategy typical of the philosophy and cultural criticism of Benjamin. He, Kushner, calls ‘into question the concept of an official history’ presenting matters instead from the point of view of the disadvantaged, those in the gay community,<sup>301</sup> in order to demonstrate that this community is ‘not just the depository of a special kind of knowledge but’ also that it has played a crucial role ‘in the construction of a national subject, polity, literature, and theatre’.<sup>302</sup> This amounts to counter-history. It is no accident that the main protagonist shares part of Benjamin’s name; and when, towards the end of the play, in Scene 2 of Act V, Prior Walter and Harper, another of the plays *mortal* characters, ascend to heaven, it is no coincidence either that ‘the deserted, derelict [...] rubble [...] strewn’ surroundings in which they find themselves call forth the image of desolation

300 Handelmann, *Fragments*, 168.

301 David Román, ‘November 1, 1992: AIDS/*Angels in America*’ in Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (eds) *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 42.

302 David Savran, ‘Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation’ in Geis and Kruger (eds), *Approaching the Millennium*, 36.

and destruction heaped upon destruction that Walter Benjamin's Angel of History is described as bearing witness to in the 'Theses', as he is inexorably carried forward (facing backwards all the time) by the storm of "progress" blowing from paradise. Except that it was Benjamin's angel (based on Klee's 'Angelus Novus') who was being exiled, rather than God Himself.

As *Angels in America* unfolds, though, it becomes ever more clear that it is not only Benjamin to whom tribute is being paid. In the announcement of God's disappearance there are also seismic reverberations of Nietzsche's nineteenth-century chilling dispatch informing us, not simply that God has vanished, but of his *demise* to which, of course, Rilke added poetic assent in the *Duino Elegies*, which could be interpreted as expressing the despair of the bereaved: 'Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders?'.<sup>303</sup> The poet's language may be different, though sometimes, as pointed out by Erich Heller, it is difficult to distinguish between Nietzsche's thought and Rilke's verse, but the intent is the same.<sup>304</sup> As Arendt observed in regard to the *Elegies*: 'who and where the Almighty is – this remains in the form of a question that no longer hopes for an answer'.<sup>305</sup> A calamity of such dimensions had generated a fundamental *disconnection*. With this observation Arendt confirmed her credentials as an emerging counter-historian who had already taken the first steps to re-plot man's point of origin by rethinking the past in order to reveal a 'pretheological' sphere in which history was synonymous with man's own Adamic roots. In years to come, she would describe the conditions of human life on earth not in terms of God's Creation,

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303 See footnote 297 above.

304 See Heller's chapter on 'Rilke and Nietzsche' in Erich Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche: Ten Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

305 Arendt & Stern, *RLC*, 2.

but as an indeterminate gift from *nowhere*.<sup>306</sup> By that time, the 1960s, she had, though, a much clearer blueprint of the ontology of the human condition.

In the 1930s, however, the ‘no more’ of God cast into relief a whole range of issues that Arendt and her co-author and first husband, Günther Stern, drew attention to but could only address tentatively as young reviewers: what, in the absence of God, constitute the new frontiers within human experience? Will it possible now to make these frontiers intelligible? Is religion any longer possible in the absence of God? In what sense can human beings honestly say they feel at home in the world? In this chapter I will consider Arendt’s (and Stern’s) commentary on Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* in the light of these types of question and in the context, too, of the insecurities and vulnerabilities of Weimar Germany at the time. If, it seems to me, the poet was announcing the departure of the Father, then it is important to note as well that, to all intents and purposes, the Weimar Republic was *fatherless* in a number of other respects, which placed great strains upon the fabric of society. All importantly, Arendt’s and Stern’s commentary suggests the authors were searching in the poetry for answers. What they discovered, they believed, were the conditions of future religiosity in the expression of despair. Along the way though and of much greater significance, Arendt, I think, identified in what she and Stern labelled ‘the third party’ a character who, once again seemed to defy Heidegger’s depiction of *das Man* and would come to play an immensely important role as a significant other in her subsequent political philosophy.<sup>307</sup>

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306 See *HC*, for example.

307 Arendt, *RLC*, 18.

Is Kushner's a less unnerving, perhaps a more hope-filled judgement than Nietzsche's? Initially, this appears so, suggesting perhaps in more broadly conceived terms a distinction between Christian and Jewish interpretations of *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God. As Hans Jonas notes, 'the hidden God [...] is a profoundly un-Jewish conception'.<sup>308</sup> In contrast to both Nietzsche and Rilke, it seems that by couching his description of what has happened in terms of 'disappearance' the playwright has left room for the possibility that God may actually one day return. This looks like a possibility if only the angel's entreaties are listened to and acted upon and men make an effort to mend their ways by at least trying to curtail their seemingly insatiable appetite for change, for the new, for movement, exploration, intermingling, for *progress*, all of which so 'bewitched' a God 'Bored with His angels' and inspired His divine wanderlust in the first place.<sup>309</sup> There is a chance then, that God might one day come back to us. There is the suggestion here, too, of an idea from the Lurianic school of Kabbalah, discussed by Scholem in his *Sabbatai Zevi*, by Jonas in 'The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice', and cited by Susan Handelman, too, in her discussion of Benjamin.<sup>310</sup> According to this idea, Creation was accompanied by God's "withdrawal", His 'self-contraction (*tzimtzum*)' because 'in the process of creation, the divine forces "shattered" their containing "vessels" [...] the fragments [of which] "fell" and became "embedded" in the lowest material worlds'.<sup>311</sup> It has subsequently been the task of humanity to set right this "Breaking of the Vessels" and by doing so 'bring about the redemption of the cosmos itself'.<sup>312</sup> According to Scholem, this "rationalised", as it were, historical catastrophe (the writing of the

308 Hans Jonas, 'The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice', in *The Journal of Religion* 1, 67 (January 1987), 9.

309 Kushner, *Angels*, 177. Emphasis in original.

310 Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Zevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626–1676* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1973).

311 Handelman, *Fragments*, 156.

312 Ibid.

Lurianic Kabbalah needs to be viewed in the context of the catastrophic event of the expulsion, in 1492, of the Jews from Spain) intertwining it with extramundane catastrophe. As Handelman observes, '[t]he meaning of Jewish exile and redemption was now a reflection of a cosmic cataclysm that affected the very life of God'. Jonas, meanwhile, conjectures that '[c]reation was that act of absolute sovereignty with which it consented, for the sake of self-determined finitude, to be absolute no more – an act, therefore, of divine self-restriction'.<sup>313</sup>

Closer inspection of what Kushner has written suggests, however, that he has firmly shut even this door of *hope*. He demonstrates quite clearly that he believes that God will only ever enjoy émigré status and that we should give up as a pipe dream any thought that He may yet return to us. The play ends with Prior Walter sounding nothing less than a Nietzschean clarion call for '*More Life*. The Great Work Begins', a plea hardly designed to encourage the return of a *prodigal Father* who, we are informed, even before the Spring departure of 1906, had set off on numerous other explorations, on 'Voyages, not knowing where', in an effort to emulate the unending quests of men.<sup>314</sup>

Profoundly disconcerting, the notion of the Heavenly Estates abandoned by their 'landlord' (the metaphor is Erich Heller's<sup>315</sup>) does, of course, offer the possibility of release from intellectual dependency upon traditional conceptual frameworks in terms of which the world is made intelligible and articulated. Such a prospect was one which Hannah Arendt was able to exploit, though not with any real sense of originality until after the Second World War when, it seemed to her, new possibilities

313 Handelman, *Fragments*, 157. Jonas, 'The Concept of God after Auschwitz', 11.

314 Kushner, *Angels*, 177 and 280. Emphasis in original.

315 Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche*, 112–113.



opened up. As she ploughed her way through the writings of Augustine, Aristotle and Plato, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche and Rilke, amongst many others, under her mentor, Martin Heidegger, who had begun teaching at Marburg in the mid-nineteen twenties at the height of Weimar, she was though, laying the foundations for a future political philosophy. Like Nietzsche and Rilke before him, Heidegger too, it should be noted, addressed the consequences of a Godless world, ‘the utter exposure and defenselessness of the frontiers of human existence against the neighbouring void’<sup>316</sup> and, in the process, created what Arendt later described with much gratitude, as space for thinking to take place.<sup>317</sup>

Thinking or perhaps, *re-thinking* the reference points according to which we make sense of the world (for Heidegger, re-thinking in order to *unconceal* Being) was not the only option, of course, open to a European imagination unsettled by divine abandonment and whistling in the dark, as it were, as it despairingly approached the precipice beyond which loomed a spiritual void. Capitulation to a cheerless and bewildering imprisonment in absolute immanence beckoned, and it was this, indeed, that formed the backdrop to Hannah Arendt’s analysis, in the 1960s, of Adolf Eichmann’s *non-thinking* and the banality of his role in the *Shoah*. To recall Rilke, quoted earlier, ‘Each torpid turn of the world has such disinherited children, those to whom former has ceased, next hasn’t come, to belong’.<sup>318</sup> Eichmann, she will expect us to understand, was one of those disorientated by such disinheritance. In his case

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316 Ibid., 116.

317 In a letter to Heidegger that Arendt wrote on 12 March 1970 she describes Heidegger’s genius in terms of him having ‘created real room for thought’. See *Hannah Arendt, and Martin Heidegger: Letters 1925–1975*, edited by Ursula Ludz and translated by Andrew Shields (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Inc, 1998), 120.

318 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, translated by J. B. Leishman & Stephen Spender, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (London: The Hogarth Press, 1963), 7<sup>th</sup> Elegy.

though, the consequences of such disorientation were not intellectually profound but, as he and his fellow Nazis demonstrated, disturbing beyond belief.

Within a few short years of Arendt's completion of her university studies, the extremes of spiritual depression and intellectual disorientation to which Europe had succumbed became all too clear as the Nazis initiated an experiment in total control and unremitting domination releasing, in the process, the brutal and macabre side of the European imagination to a degree never before witnessed. Unleashed was a battery of heinous crimes and terror spreading death, destruction and fear across the European continent and beyond for more than a decade. This was the very antithesis of all that European man had come to appreciate as politics since its first appearance in ancient Greece. In what was still a formative decade for her in the economically, politically and culturally turbulent 1920s and indeed up until the early 1930s, when Arendt began publishing her earliest articles just prior to the demise of the Republic, her *political* response to this situation, made possible by the death of God and, for example, Nietzsche's liberating declaration that 'Only after the death of religion will the imagination be able to luxuriate again in divine spheres' was still some way off.<sup>319</sup> She observed in her 1946 paper entitled 'What is Existenz Philosophy?': 'In [an] atheised world man can be interpreted in his "abandonment" or in his "individual autonomy". For every modern philosopher – and not only for Nietzsche – this interpretation becomes a touchstone of his philosophy'.<sup>320</sup> In the context of Weimar Germany in the nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties, the fatherless society, as it might be dubbed, the young Arendt (and Günther Stern) in commenting upon Rilke's

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319 Friedrich Nietzsche, cited by Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche*, 121.

320 Arendt, 'What is Existenz Philosophy?', 39.

*Duino Elegies* highlighted a number motifs that would subsequently feature very much in her writings. It is to these motifs that I will turn my attention in this chapter.

During this period Arendt wrote several relatively short articles and reviews on, for example, Martin Buber, Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, Zionism, the schooling of Jewish children in Germany and, as we have seen, the so called 'Jewish Question' more generally conceived.<sup>321</sup> One of these pieces is the paper referred to already as 'The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question', written in 1932. This paper is important because it revealed, as I have indicated, an enormous amount about Arendt's perception of what being Jewish meant, or should have come to mean she thought, by the twentieth century. Essentially, drawing heavily on Herder to qualify her use of Kant's more formal pronouncements on the conditions of agency, we have seen how Arendt "released" the Jews from what she judged to be self-imposed constraints born of a conception of themselves determined by a very introverted and particularistic historical consciousness. The article was an early exercise in counter-history which sought to avoid relying upon the past as it was conventionally understood, used as a prop, as it were, upon which to lean in order to avoid standing on one's own feet.<sup>322</sup> Read in conjunction with 'The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question' the "news" about God conveyed by Nietzsche, gives us a good indication of just how liberatory for Arendt's own intellectual development her essay was. In charting the direction her thinking was taking the commentary on the *Duino Elegies* published in 1930 is very revealing too. Sandwiched between her doctoral research

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321 Hannah Arendt, 'A Guide for Youth: Martin Buber' (1935) and 'The Jewish Question' (1937 or 1938) are collected in *TJW*.

322 'It is', wrote Heinrich Blücher, Hannah Arendt's second husband, 'a long process in a human being's development to learn [...] not to lean on something. Not to walk on crutches'. This extract is from his last lecture delivered at Bard College, available from: [http://www.bard.edu/bluecher/lectures/last\\_lecture/last\\_pf.thm](http://www.bard.edu/bluecher/lectures/last_lecture/last_pf.thm) (Accessed 16 January 2008).

and ‘The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question’, the commentary does not have a Jewish theme but it is an important text because it indicates a number of ideas that Arendt would subsequently develop. It was also a text that in many ways reflected its times. Unless otherwise indicated, I will, in my discussion below, draw upon Arendt’s and Stern’s own translation of extracts from the *Elegies*, although, I will also use the translation by Lieshman and Spender to fill in any gaps.<sup>323</sup>

Hannah Arendt and Günther Stern published their Rilke commentary in 1930. It was to be the only piece that Arendt co-authored. The commentary, entitled simply, ‘Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*’ was recently omitted from a selection of her writings edited by Jerome Kohn on the grounds that this ‘close analysis of the prosody and diction of the *Elegies* would be inaccessible to non-German readers’. Besides, the editor continues, ‘it is not clear how much of [the text] Arendt actually wrote’.<sup>324</sup> To deal with this latter point first, while it is true that she and Stern did not always see eye to eye, it nevertheless seems plausible to assume, since Arendt neither subsequently made any attempt to retract interpretations expressed in the piece nor conveyed in public opinions contradicting them, that she was happy having her name associated with this text.<sup>325</sup>

However, more than this, while it is conceded that a reading knowledge of German would, at the very least, make the complexity of Arendt’s and Stern’s analysis much easier to comprehend, it is felt that sufficient sense can be made of their line of argument even in translation to justify discussing it here as an important document

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323 See footnote 318 above.

324 Kohn, *EiU*, xv.

325 Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb, for example, refers to Arendt’s *rejection* of the line Stern took in his lecture on Kafka, delivered at the Institut d’Études Germaniques in Paris in 1933. Walter Benjamin similarly repudiated Stern’s interpretation. See Hannah Arendt, *RLC*, xix.

following on soon after the completion of Arendt's doctoral dissertation on Augustine. In fact, the essay is far too important a document to be omitted from a discussion of Hannah Arendt's intellectual development, I would contend. This is partly because of Rilke's towering importance still in Weimar. Peter Gay, for instance, remarks that 'everyone read him. Young soldiers went to their death with his verses on their lips'. And as Gay further notes, 'Thomas Mann recognised him, "of course", as a "lyrical phenomenon of the highest rank"'.<sup>326</sup> In addition to this though, given Arendt's line of reasoning in her earlier research, the Rilke commentary picks up on two themes that were of special interest to her: man's disunion from God and man's capacity to express love. The disunion of men from God, introduced in the 1929 dissertation as a result of Arendt thinking afresh about man's origins, was restated more forcefully in the commentary on the *Elegies*. Arendt and Stern appear to have accepted the idea expressed by Rilke, that, however hard man might try, he should not delude himself any longer by thinking that his appeals to God will be heard in future because, to all intents and purposes, God has removed Himself beyond man's reach. Like Rilke and like Nietzsche, this was the new context of disconnection in which thinking and writing would now have to take place. The importance of Arendt's and Stern's commentary lies, I think, in grasping this bigger picture, and does not depend upon fully comprehending every minute detail or every literary nuance of their critical analysis.

A crude summary of the commentary could be expressed as follows: Rilke, the authors note, has established that man has been abandoned by God. Humans are henceforth, condemned to lead lives in echoless immanence from which there appears

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<sup>326</sup> Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 52.

to be no escape; there is no possibility of transcendence or redemption, of being heard by a higher power. We are alone, deserted. Yet, out of this bleak solitude some small measure of hope is offered, the result of a certain religious ambiguity in the poetry. If the opposition between what is this-worldly and what is other-worldly has effectively been dissolved, why then does the poet still speak of ‘angelic orders’ (First Elegy) if not to allow us some sort of absolution. Is there perhaps, just the slightest glimmer of a possibility that we might yet escape our imprisonment in immanence and find redemption? Well, just as in Kushner’s play, these are no “ordinary” angels; they are, perhaps, rather the equivalent of Nietzsche’s *Übermenschen* introduced in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – an order of not quite human but then not quite divine beings either, who are released from having to think in terms of the concepts, categories and distinctions employed by humans. This is what privileges them from having to live in our world and this is why they occupy layers of being, hierarchically above and beyond our own.<sup>327</sup> If we learn to speak to them though, in the simplest of terms about our human achievements and the objective world which surrounds us, perhaps these angels might just take notice:

So show him  
something simple which, formed over generations,  
lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze.  
Tell him of things. He will stand astonished; as *you* stood  
by the rope-maker in Rome or the potter along the Nile.  
(Ninth Elegy)<sup>328</sup>

Or again, this time from the Seventh Elegy:

Angel, gaze, for it’s *we* –  
O mightiness, tell them that *we* were capable of it – my  
breath’s too short for this celebration. So, after all, we have *not*  
failed to make use of the spaces, these generous spaces,  
these, *our* spaces.<sup>329</sup>

327 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961).

328 Quoted in Arendt, *RLC*, 6.

329 Leishman and Spender, *Duino Elegies*, 75. Emphases in original.

Indeed, is it not the case anyway that things, inanimate objects, in the world are dependent upon us, upon humans, rescuing them from their transience by our uttering their names? Might it not be that such rescuing, the commentators suggest, constitutes our ‘mission’ in life? From the Ninth Elegy:

Are we, perhaps, *here* just for saying: House,  
Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Fruit tree, Window, –  
possibly: Pillar, Tower? . . . but for *saying*, remember,  
oh, for such saying as never the things themselves  
hoped so intensely to be.<sup>330</sup>

There is a *quid pro quo* here: in the act of naming and establishing the being of objects in a way that they cannot achieve on their own, we might at least hover between the immanence to which we have been condemned and a transcendent realm we can only ever imagine. We might just achieve this if we can sufficiently impress the Angelic orders and provoke their astonishment with our words.<sup>331</sup>

If we imagine the uttering of names will secure our place in the higher orders of the angels our hopes can only be dashed, however. The world it seems, has come to exist nowhere ‘but within’ [because] ever diminishing, outwardness dwindles’.<sup>332</sup> We have become, it turns out, ‘disinherited’ beings. Arendt and Stern translate extracts from the Seventh Elegy thus: ‘the exterior disappears more and more’; human existence has been reduced to an ‘imageless act’; and, ‘where once there was an enduring building, a mental image suggests itself’.<sup>333</sup> Our position, it seems, as Fatherless children ‘is thus directly grounded in futility’.<sup>334</sup>

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330 Ibid., 85. Emphasis in original.

331 Ibid.

332 Ibid., 71–73.

333 Arendt, *RLC*, 8.

334 Ibid.

All may not be lost, though. *Love* may yet hold the key to our salvation – or, at least, a salvation of sorts. If ‘things are becoming ruins, “pushed away” and “replaced” by [an “imageless” act]’<sup>335</sup> then perhaps an expression of love that has achieved such purity that it can demonstrate it has lost all ‘specificity’ and has become transformed, in effect, into an ‘objectless being-in-love’ from which the beloved has been ‘forgotten and surpassed’, can disclose a new world, a world that ‘is a fundamentally different world from the one that presents itself to us in our daily lives’. We are back with something that looks very much like Augustine’s concept of *Caritas*, devotion to God at the expense of everything and everyone in the material world. If love could achieve such purity, Rilke believed, then we would indeed have achieved much. Nevertheless, we must still remember that ‘when the this-worldly sphere is surpassed, it is not for the sake of a radically other world, but for the sake [only] of the higher layers of the world, which are not properly other-worldly despite their fundamental inaccessibility’.<sup>336</sup> This is the most we can hope for. And in the meanwhile, we are condemned to inhabit this world in which feeling at home is simply not possible at all.

A summary cannot do full justice to every point made by the commentators in their interpretation of the *Elegies* but I do think it is possible to highlight at least some ideas in their discussion that would come to prominence in Hannah Arendt’s subsequent political writings. To put it a different way, there are motifs in the commentary that will reappear with some modification but in a significant form in Hannah Arendt’s post-war *political* philosophy and these motifs can be traced back to ideas she was already thinking about and discussing in the 1930s. One such motif concerned, for example, the profundity of the loss of God. Arendt would subsequently

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335 Ibid.

336 Arendt, *RLC*, 12–13.



recognise this enormity reproduced in the insane desire by the Nazis to annihilate European Jewry, so much so in fact, that she would, like Nietzsche and Rilke before her, interpret this as a moment demanding nothing less than a reconsideration of the frontiers within human experience. A second motif would concern the loss of the material world and the inwardness that this presaged. Echoing the poet's advice to speak of 'simple' things Arendt would offer, in *The Human Condition*, a strikingly uncomplicated ontology, uncomplicated at least in technical terms, compared with Heidegger's *Being and Time*, for example. And in 'the third party' Arendt and Stern identified a character who would reappear, as the spectator-judge, to play an immensely important role in her later political philosophy. However, before I say any more about these motifs I think it might be worthwhile to highlight certain aspects of life in the Weimar Republic at the time Arendt and Stern were collaborating on their commentary, which suggest that in some ways it, too, can be described in terms of the loss of the father, or, at least as Peter Gay depicts it, as a struggle between father and son.<sup>337</sup>

From a political perspective, Weimar Germany was, at the end of the nineteen twenties, dubiously perched at the point of no return. Events were rapidly and irrevocably shunting aside the 'Stresemann era' of relative calm and stability for the Republic following the uncertainties and turbulent years that accompanied its "inception".<sup>338</sup> In September of 1930, the National Socialist Party (NSDAP), now under Hitler's unquestioned leadership, would make enormous gains in the Reichstag elections reflecting its steadily growing influence across society achieved through the

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<sup>337</sup> Gay, *Weimar Culture*.

<sup>338</sup> The Republic was constitutionally established in 1919, but Detlev Peukert's observation that its 'temporal boundaries' are, in fact, 'open to dispute' that is, its precise starting point unclear, is worthy of note. See Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*.

establishment, frequently by individual party activists, of National Socialist associations with strong popular appeal. Not only had a strategy of measured permeation of existing professional bodies and special interest groups resulted in the infiltration of, for example, the Nationalist League of Commercial Employees, representing white-collar workers, and the Reich Agrarian League, but new ‘party “formations”’ (*Gliederungen*)’ such as the National Socialist German Students’ Association and the Hitler Youth, both formed in 1926, enjoyed a wide following. The NSDAP had in place, and ready to be implemented, a political programme considered by many now to be traceable back as far as 1920. The two central tenets of this programme, racial theory grounded in anti-Semitism and the concept of *Lebensraum* (living space), suggesting as it did *military conquest*, forewarned of what some would have envisaged as a dark and threatening world (the product of “non-thinking” in Arendtian terms) into which Europe could be plunged if the NSDAP were ever to achieve ultimate power. The National Socialists, on the other hand, looked forward with much hope and expectation to precisely just such a prospect.<sup>339</sup>

National Socialism, at one and the same time, represented a new departure as well as the hope that respect for authority and tradition could be recovered. The Nietzschean tension between the forces of past and future (‘He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past [...] will never know what happiness is’<sup>340</sup>) can already be seen in Hitler’s efforts to remove von Hindenburg as Chancellor. Hitler was the charismatic younger statesman, a young pretender with growing popular appeal trying to oust von Hindenburg, the respected elder statesman and defender of tradition, authority, and cultural and moral values. Hitler, of course, once

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339 Kolb, *The Weimar Republic*, 101.

340 Nietzsche, *UM*, 62.

von Hindenburg had been removed, would soon become a father figure in his own right. His character would mirror National Socialism's own schizophrenia, its 'reactionary modernism', which was at once driven by the possibilities offered by advances in science and technology and yet rooted in mythology, in nostalgia and German romanticism.<sup>341</sup> Such tensions can be detected also, I think, in the German society of the time more broadly conceived.

Quite literally, the circumstances many young Germans found themselves in as a consequence of the First World War, was to be without a father. They were brought up under the parental guidance of their mother alone because their father was either off fighting in the trenches or had been killed in action or was seriously wounded.

Demographic change that, as Detlev Peukert (1993) reliably informs us, had begun prior to the war exacerbated this state of affairs in Germany. During the decade and a half between 1910 and 1925, for example, the population had carried on growing, which meant that by 1925 all age-groups from twelve year-olds upwards were larger than they had been in 1910.<sup>342</sup> In contrast, the ravages of the European conflagration had impacted significantly on the male population between the ages of twenty-five and fifty. Most notably, the biggest losses were of those aged between thirty and thirty-five resulting in the fact that, again, to take 1925 as a reference point, there were actually fewer men in this age range at this time than fifteen years earlier. Given that there had been particularly high birth rates in the first decade of the twentieth century this implies that many of the fatherless during and after the war and into the

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341 Though failing to gain a majority in the presidential election of 1925, Hindenburg was, nevertheless elected, initiating, what Gay describes as 'the revenge of the father'. On 'reactionary modernism' see, Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

342 Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, translated by Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 86.

era of the Weimar Republic, were adolescents, at an extremely impressionable and developmentally sensitive stage of their lives. There was a disconnection of sorts here too then, in society itself, with all the accompanying insecurities and vulnerabilities this brings.

It was at this moment, conceptually speaking, that German youth was, in fact, officially born in the sense that *Jugend* (youth) started to gain currency as an expression implying a ‘breakdown of traditional ties and social controls’.<sup>343</sup> The young were suddenly attracting notice. ‘*Der Jugendliche*’ (young person), an expression, which Peukert observes, only entered the German vernacular in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century became, during the Republic, an abbreviation associated with negative connotations used just as much to refer to *der jugendliche Arbeiter* (the young worker) as to refer to *der jugendliche Kriminelle* (the young criminal) and indicating a “problem”, something to be disapproved of, in one sense or another.<sup>344</sup> To be sure, the suggestion is not that the social problems confronting successive governments throughout the time of the Republic can all be attributed to the lack of paternal guidance alone, which affected an entire generation of German youth during and after the First World War. The causes of the social problems confronting the Republic were obviously far more diverse and much more complex in nature than that. However, if a variety of economic, political and social issues including the failure of the emerging welfare state system to fulfil its fiscal promises, for instance, combined to bring down the Republic, the concept of the fatherless society is suggested more as a means of getting a sense of the spiritual fatigue and fragility typical of the times. This was the context in which Arendt and Stern co-

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

authored their commentary on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, a poem which spoke of man's despair in the face of his abandonment by God.

Family cohesion was beginning to come unstuck and, of course, the politicians of the day recognised that a generation of fatherless adolescents spelled problems. The seriousness with which the whole issue was treated was reflected in legislation passed during the 1920s. This legislation included, for instance, the Reich Youth Welfare Law and the Reich Juvenile Court Law of 1922 and 1923 respectively, laws 'which established the principle of educational rehabilitation for juvenile offenders'.<sup>345</sup> Additionally, at the end of 1926, the Reichstag passed the Law to Protect Youth from Trashy and Filthy Writings. This law, supported by an array of interested parties amongst whom were numbered teachers, social workers and clerics, for example, was embraced because its intention was to protect young people from writing which, even though it was hardly pornographic at all (when judged, for example, against twenty-first century standards) was, nevertheless, taken to appeal 'to the most basic human instincts' thereby threatening to undermine all 'respect for authority'.<sup>346</sup> The fact that this writing was composed largely of 'heart-thumping, horseback-mounting, detective-revolver-packing romance and adventure stories' that were readily available, is, in a sense, neither here nor there.<sup>347</sup> The point is, the state authorities clearly felt legislation was demanded, presumably because of a lack of parental guidance that might otherwise have naturally deterred the young from the appeal of such material.

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>346</sup> Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 106. Weitz points out that shrewd publishers who were quick to realise the potential profits that could be made from such stories, were in a position to use their presses to satisfy the demands of a mass market through cheaply produced books and brochures.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

So, growing social tensions within the Weimar Republic, challenges to traditional ways of behaving and demonstrating respect for authority, and the manner in which the Republic's politicians attempted to address these problems, can be seen, on one level, as intimately bound up with real losses in the adult male population. The hiatus created by these losses was a product of broad unanticipated demographic variations and developments in German society and the equally unplanned consequences of war. In this sense therefore, the loss of the father was not something that was either chosen or wished for. It was not anybody's fault.

In a contrasting sense though, the loss of the father was something very much wished for by some within Weimar society; it was a condition to which an amorphous collection of artists, cartoonists, film-makers, novelists, playwrights, sculptors and poets, for example, very much aspired. Known as the Expressionists, though lacking anything that could begin to look programmatic, they consciously strove, in their own individual ways, to stir up "trouble" (surely the prerogative of the young) by questioning the established order of things. The Dadaists, whose discontent with the waste and futility of war (the First World War) turned to disgust with the society that had sanctioned it, did much the same. Even those amongst the Expressionists whose subject matter seemed on the surface peaceable enough were, if one scratched below the surface, "dangerous": 'the inherent artistic direction of their work was as subversive of established tradition as George Grosz's savage drawings of revolting plutocrats, coquettish prostitutes, and maimed veterans'.<sup>348</sup> Their revolt too, as Gay has summed it up, was 'the revolt of the son' against the father, the revolt of those who, in the wake of the destruction wrought by the First World War, wanted to

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348 Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 110.

broadcast their repugnance and disapproval as loudly as they could from the rooftops. This was a rebellion of those who sought spiritual renewal for society against those who were perceived as the representatives of unfashionable and reactionary tradition.<sup>349</sup> The looseness of this grouping of individuals working in a range of different spheres apart and the lack of a concerted political approach or direction, acknowledged, the Expressionists were, nevertheless, unanimous in their repudiation of the past and their hopes for a new reality. From Kafka's unsent letter to his own father written in 1919, we can distil the essence of their grievances.<sup>350</sup> (It is noteworthy that Scholem too had major differences of opinion with his father. Like Benjamin he became something of 'a restless and rebellious son, fiercely resisting assimilation into the world of philistine respectability'.<sup>351</sup> On the other hand, Hannah Arendt's father died when she was still a child and though her mother remarried Arendt, in a sense, spent her life always looking for fatherly recognition either from Karl Jaspers or Martin Heidegger.) Written by a son in reaction to an all-knowing, overbearing paternal presence unable to accept him for what he was in his own right, Kafka indicted his father for encouraging behaviour in him that reflected only his (Kafka senior's) values and sense of self-importance, not behaviour that had anything to do with the younger Kafka's future development as an autonomous individual, who, as we now know, would have something of his own to say. Indeed, anything expressing Kafka's own creativity or distinctiveness was at best belittled and dismissed but, more often, firmly quashed by his father, if Kafka's charges are to be believed.

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349 'The Revolt of the Son' is the title of the fifth chapter of Gay's, *The Weimar Republic*.

350 Franz Kafka, *Letter to My Father*, translated by Howard Colyer (North Carolina: Lulu, 2008).

351 Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 314.

Personal as it was, Kafka's letter remains symbolic of the wider challenge to tradition posed by the Expressionists (and by Benjamin and Scholem too, for that matter). This challenge frequently manifest itself through a questioning of the father-son relationship echoing Kafka's except that, unlike his letter at least, it was intended for public consumption. It is perhaps no accident that in 1910 Freud's research into the psyche led him to *classify*, feelings of guilt and castration anxiety on the part of the son as nothing less than a 'complex', 'the father complex' to be precise, as it initially came to be known and discussed by him in a paper entitled 'The Future Prospects of Psycho-Analytic Therapy'. What Freud thought he had clinically identified was filial expression of hostility and fear in relation to the father. After 1910 he used the idea almost synonymously in the now more widely recognised 'Oedipus complex', which has since come to replace the older theory.<sup>352</sup>

The challenge to tradition was evident in other ways too, through a loathing of militarism, for example, and anything that called for obedience, and through an almost mystical vision of mankind living in a rejuvenated and harmonious society. Plays by Walter Hasenclever, *Der Sohn*, for example, written in 1914, or Leopold Jessner's 1919 production of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*; Kirchner's, Klee's and Kandinsky's respective artistic experiments in portraiture, fantasy and abstractions in search of an alternative reality; and, the original pacifist plot of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, written by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, but edited by director Robert Wiene in such a way as to make the 1920 release of the film more of an apology for

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352 See for example, Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, translated by Angela Richards (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989).



the wickedness inherent in authority that the authors had set out to expose, are just a small sample of the Expressionists' assault upon tradition.<sup>353</sup>

It is worth noting here that Expressionist calls for the regeneration of man were not the only ones being voiced in Germany in the early decades of the twentieth century. Martin Buber, for instance, whom I have already mentioned, in papers he wrote and lectures he began delivering in the first decade of the twentieth century, and particularly in his "Three Speeches to the Jews" between 1909 and 1911 delivered to the Prague Jewish student organisation *Bar Kochba*, called for a total renewal, a Nietzschean transformation of values no less, not just piecemeal *reform*, on the grounds that a much more personal experience of Judaism was called for.<sup>354</sup> Indeed, Buber was highly influential amongst many young Jewish intellectuals at the time though he failed to win over the likes of Walter Benjamin or Hannah Arendt, each of whom was never fully drawn into parochial debates about how Judaism needed to develop as a religion at the expense of wider, much less particularistic concerns about cultural, social and political issues affecting society as a whole. All of which brings me back to those central motifs in Arendt's and Stern's commentary on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. What exactly are the key points that we can distil from their discussion? What impressions are we left with after reading the commentary?

First, of overriding significance to the commentators was the concern expressed for the 'echolessness [...] from which', they suggested, the *Elegies* 'spring'.<sup>355</sup> As quoted above '[...] who and where the Almighty is – this remains in the form of a question

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353 See Gay, *The Weimar Republic*, for a valuable and informative account of this.

354 Buber, 'The Renewal of Judaism'.

355 Ibid., 22.

that no longer hopes for an answer'.<sup>356</sup> Clearly this signalled that a *profound* change was required in the way we seek to make our lives intelligible. As already indicated, Hannah Arendt would assent, in *The Human Condition* for instance, to the idea of God's departure by attributing human existence on earth to an unspecified gift from nowhere rather than divine creation. Yet, none of this should be taken to imply that Arendt and Stern believed, for instance, that what Rilke had thereby demonstrated was that God does not exist, that He is dead:

For the impossibility of encountering God is not proof of his non-existence as far as the Elegies are concerned; this impossibility explicitly becomes God's distance from us – a distance that can be experienced, in its negativity, again and again, and thus becomes a religious fact.<sup>357</sup>

If anything, the authors concluded their commentary by drawing attention to the new grounds of religiosity observing, 'the despair of being able to encounter Him [...] becomes the last residuum of religiousness, and elegy becomes the last literary form of religious certification'.<sup>358</sup> What the authors seemed to be implying was that religion was not a thing of the past but it did now need to be conceived in terms of wholly different human experience. If this was the message on which the commentary was concluded, there were, however, some other significant points that I think we would do well not to lose sight of.

For example, Rilke, indeed like Nietzsche, knew that the response to abandonment had, of necessity, to be in the form of a *fundamental* shift in the boundaries of human experience. That is to say, as Erich Heller has noted, it was not simply 'nuances' that would be argued over in future:

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<sup>356</sup> See footnote 305 above.

<sup>357</sup> Arendt, *RLC*, 23.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*

The word nuance presupposes an order of firmly established ideas and objects between which an indefinite number of subtly-colored shades may playfully mediate, whereas Nietzsche's and Rilke's sensibilities tend towards a radical denial of that very principle of separation – philosophically speaking, the *principium individuationis*, within a world perceived under the dual aspects of immanence and transcendence – on which our intellectual perception has been based throughout the centuries.<sup>359</sup>

The *Shoah* would, for Hannah Arendt, demand revisions of a just such a profound nature post-1945. Thus, her discussions of freedom, equality, indeed the very nature of politics itself would still reverberate decades later with the poet's observation in the First Elegy: 'All of the living, though, make the mistake of drawing too sharp distinctions'.<sup>360</sup> For one who made very 'sharp distinctions' herself between work and labour, for instance, or between the public and the private realms this may seem ironic. However, like Rilke and Nietzsche before her, it was the frontiers of the conventional conceptual terrain at the time that, we must recognise, Arendt was concerned with. For example, the liberal idea of freedom as freedom *from* politics, formalised by Isaiah Berlin as the negative concept of liberty, seemed to her, in *The Human Condition*, to be a nonsense.<sup>361</sup> The whole point about freedom is that it 'is exclusively located *in* the political realm', she observed, not in activities located outside this realm.<sup>362</sup> If negative liberty offered anything, she thought, it was precisely that, no liberty at all.

This warning about making 'too sharp distinctions' seems to have a deeper significance in Arendt's work, though. I have previously argued that it was in terms of

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359 Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche*, 104.

360 Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, Leishman and Spender translation, First Elegy.

361 See, Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

362 Arendt, *HC*, 31. Emphasis added.

human history that Arendt formulated her lines of reasoning against Heidegger. As we have seen, where he used fundamental ontology to establish the grounds of 'being-with-one-another' the young doctoral student took an empirical turn by way of Augustine and looked to the generations leading back to Adam and the Christian concept of grace, for truths of human history that would support a theory of social life. The appearance of totalitarianism and the *Shoah* changed everything, though. In the wake of the Second World War Arendt would be struck by the necessity to completely rethink what we are doing in order to secure afresh the moorings that make human experience intelligible and communicable. And this rethinking would involve an excursion into ontology whose terminus would be the publication of *The Human Condition*. This did not imply, however, that for Arendt history was now dead. Quite the contrary, I think, history and ontology in her post-war writings came to share a symbiotic relationship much like Immanuel Kant's concepts and intuitions. The one was nothing without the other, the sharp distinction between them in a sense dissolved. So, history cast into relief those phenomena of origin whose significance we might otherwise overlook, the American and Hungarian revolutions, for instance, or the student protests of the late nineteen sixties, while the source of illumination for such events could be traced to the ontology of the human condition. Arendt would come to the realisation, I think, that *Historie* without ontology remains blind, but ontology without *Geschichte* will be empty.

A second key idea from the commentary connects the estrangement from material things in the world indicated by Rilke, to the 'striking' loss of experience Hannah Arendt would herself point to three decades later in *The Human Condition*.<sup>363</sup> The

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363 See footnote 69 above.

dwindling of ‘outwardness’ will translate into the incapacity to be articulate about the world around us. The poet was in essence then, presaging that breakdown in communication, which the political philosopher thought reconstituting public discourse would correct. Our vanishing surroundings were indicative, according to Arendt and Stern, of ‘solitude’ arising from ‘the transience and unreliability of this world’.<sup>364</sup> I take this to be an early indication of Arendt’s subsequent critique of introspection in general and Cartesianism in particular which, she argued in *The Human Condition*, for example, had grown at the expense of common sense.<sup>365</sup> The more inward looking we are the more deprived of and the less articulate about the world we become. Translating lines from Rilke’s Seventh Elegy, Arendt and Stern observed that ‘Where there was once an enduring building, a mental image suggests itself’.<sup>366</sup> By the 1960s Arendt would bemoan the fact that ‘modern man [...] did not gain this world when he lost the other world [‘Christian otherworldliness’], and he did not gain life, strictly speaking, either; he was thrust back upon it, thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself’.<sup>367</sup>

The final idea I want to draw attention to concerns the concept of the ‘third party’ that Arendt and Stern discussed in relation to love. For Rilke, they state, ‘love refers primarily to the situation of objectless being-in-love, in which, conversely, the beloved person is forgotten and surpassed in favor of a transcendence’. The beloved may be the occasion for the expression of love but only by ceasing to be fixated upon or obsessed with the beloved can access to the “‘angels’ hierarchies”’, have a chance

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364 Arendt, *RLC*, 12.

365 Arendt, *HC*, 280–284.

366 Arendt, *RLC*, 8.

367 Arendt, *HC*, 320.

of being turned into an achievement.<sup>368</sup> Were this not the case, love would simply be “squandered” on the beloved. Yet, love as the ‘guarantee of being’, it turns out, can be more than just the achievement of the lovers alone, that is, it can be the accomplishment of a ‘third party’ too, who is, in effect, a ‘questioner’.<sup>369</sup> If the love expressed by lovers indicates ‘pure duration’, it is the third party’s questioning, the commentators notice, that beyond this, elicits that their ‘embraces almost promise eternity’.<sup>370</sup>

Lovers, gratified in each other, I am asking you  
about us. You hold each other. Do you have proof?  
(Second Elegy)

Arendt and Stern observed that questioning *transformed* ungratified lovers, for whom the present would naturally melt away, into ‘those “gratified in each other”, for whom [instead] the present is absolutized and elevated to “eternity” in the fulfillment of the moment. [...] Time and and transience are thereby paralyzed, and an existence rescued from transience is guaranteed within the fullness of love’.<sup>371</sup>

Arendt’s and Stern’s brief discussion of ‘the third party’ within the overall commentary on Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* is important for two reasons, I think. First, it pointed to meaningfulness as a possibility lying beyond the mute actualities of an activity. If love was for Rilke, according to his commentators, ‘an exemplary situation, for love is principally love of the abandoned’,<sup>372</sup> politics would subsequently become an exemplary situation for Hannah Arendt, for every political act would be confirmation anew of the conditions of human life on earth. (Ontology without *Geschichte* is empty.) In addition to this, however, Arendt and Stern located in the

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368 Ibid., 15–16.

369 Ibid., 18.

370 Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, Leishman and Spender translation, Second Elegy, 37.

371 Arendt, *RLC*, 19.

372 Ibid., 13.

‘third party’ a *significant other*, I would argue, whose role as an *interrogator* of actualities was perceived to be crucial to the disclosure of their meaning. We have here not only the suggestion then, that *being with others* is fundamental, even though on a first reading this does not seem to be an idea central to the commentary but, we have the prefiguration too, of the spectator-judge in the guise of a questioner whose role in Hannah Arendt’s later political philosophy it would be to think critically about events from the vantage of a unique understanding distance making possible the disclosure of these events’ *original* significance. Before we consider this spectator-judge, however, who he or she is and what he or she does, we need first to consider what was a truly significant point of departure in Hannah Arendt’s life, an event that provoked substantial rethinking on her part – the *Shoah*, a crime we might describe as one against Being perpetrated upon beings.

## CHAPTER 5

### Crimes against Being Perpetrated upon Beings

*Heidegger has not really established his ontology, since the second volume of Sein und Zeit has never appeared. To the question concerning the meaning of Being he has given the provisional answer, in itself unintelligible, that the meaning of Being is temporality. With this he implied, and with his analysis of human reality (i.e., of the Being of Man), which is conditioned by death, he established that the meaning of Being is nothingness.*

Hannah Arendt<sup>373</sup>

*Finally, it dawned on me, that I was not engaged in writing an historical book, [The Origins of Totalitarianism] even though large parts of it clearly contain historical analyses, but a political book [...].*

Hannah Arendt<sup>374</sup>

*[...] there was a kind of prohibition on the very quality of coherence. To make a sequential narrative of what happened would have been to make indecently rational what had been obscenely irrational. It would have been to normalize through familiar form an utterly aberrant content. One was not to make a nice story out of loathsome cruelty and of piercing, causeless hurt.*

Eva Hoffman<sup>375</sup>

In my discussion thus far, I have drawn on texts that Hannah Arendt composed in the late 1920s through to the mid-1930s that, I think, demonstrate how much she relied upon history and what she judged to be historical evidence to support her arguments. So, for example, in order to express her unease with Heidegger's claims about Dasein in *Being and Time*, she turned to the works of Saint Augustine to look for the *historical* foundations of social life which, I think, she felt offered a convincing

373 Hannah Arendt, 'What is Existenz Philosophy', in *Partisan Review* 1, 13 (1946): 46.

374 Cited by Richard J. Bernstein in his, 'The Origins of Totalitarianism: Not History but Politics'. This paper was delivered at the conference on Hannah Arendt: Politics and Responsibility, organised by the Institute of Contemporary History and Wiener Library, New York University in London, and the Forum for European Philosophy, 10 November 2002. The original source is not indicated.

375 Eva Hoffman. *After Such Knowledge: A Meditation on the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2004), 14–15.



alternative to Heidegger's ontological analysis of 'Being-with-one-another'. It was her confidence in history that also led her to be critical with the Jews for living in what she might be seen to have regarded as a 'long present', that is, determined by ideas essentially belonging to the past. Things could be different. Arendt recognised that we do not have to be slaves to "laws" established by our ancestors (and where religious laws, supposedly passed down by God) from which we are then unable to extricate ourselves. We can change. To this extent Arendt agreed with Heidegger. One could still be a Jew, she seemed to be arguing, a Jew who was certainly knowledgeable about his or her historical roots, but whose behaviour as a Jew, crucially, had been *re-evaluated*. There was something clearly Nietzschean in this, hence my reference to re-evaluation, an ambition central, of course, to *On the Genealogy of Morality*.<sup>376</sup>

Between the mid-nineteen thirties and the late nineteen forties, Arendt worked on a biography of the eighteenth-century German Jewess, Rahel Varnhagen. She was interned by the Nazis in occupied France though, she would escape and flee to the United States of America carrying the manuscript of Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* with her. She got divorced from Günther Stern and married Heinrich Blücher. And, in America, she wrote for the German émigré newspaper *Aufbau*, added her voice to calls for a Jewish army during World War Two and became directly involved, for a short time at least, in plans to establish a federal state of Jews and Palestinians in what is now the State of Israel. During this time she also made a tiger's leap, intellectually speaking, discovering in politics something *fundamentally* human that she had previously failed to notice. Combining Kantian critical philosophy with the hunt

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<sup>376</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson and translated by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

amongst the ruins of a broken tradition for remnants of genuine historical experience (inspired by Benjamin), she would, between the late nineteen forties and the beginning of the nineteen fifties present us with the image of a new form of terror-based government, namely totalitarianism that, she judged, meant we would have to think differently in future about the conceptual frameworks we use to orient ourselves in the world. Totalitarianism, and in particular the attempt by the Nazis to rid Europe of its Jews was, she thought, profoundly disturbing. Indeed, it surely altered the way we would have to think about ourselves and our relations with those around us from this point forward. In terms of Heideggerian *Geschichte*, for example, the *Shoah* represented for Hannah Arendt as significant and deep an imprint on human consciousness as the appearance of Christianity had made. It changed everything. Her former teacher did not seem to agree.

Ironically, it was her major historical study of totalitarianism, published in the early nineteen fifties, that opened her eyes to what she would describe, by the close of the decade, as the *human condition*. The human condition, to all intents and purposes amounted to ‘nonappearance [sic] in the appearances’,<sup>377</sup> and it involved more than just history: it implied ontology as well. In the present chapter I will consider *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a book whose tripartite divisions mimicked Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*. In this book Arendt presented totalitarian government in terms of the desire to deny individuals their humanity so that they ended up living with each other but not in terms of anything approaching plurality. As Robert Eaglestone has observed, ‘The book is an attempt to reframe the terms of reference for the times in which we find ourselves’.<sup>378</sup> Totalitarianism, to this extent, represented the

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<sup>377</sup> See Arendt, *LKPP*, 79.

<sup>378</sup> Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, 208.

death of politics. In addition to the disrespect, degradation, humiliation and torture, employed to strip away men's humanity in totalitarianism's death camps and Gulags, it seems to me, however, that it was Hannah Arendt's recognition that this was ultimately most successfully achieved by destroying the *space* that individuals need in order to be with one another as political equals that was, perhaps, her most noble contribution to political philosophy.

Amongst the more abstruse texts that Arendt composed between the mid-nineteen thirties and the late nineteen forties was her 1946 paper on the question of 'Existenz Philosophy'.<sup>379</sup> In it she was highly critical of the significance she judged Heidegger to have attributed to time in regard to the meaning of Being because, ultimately, according to Arendt, 'despite all tricks and sophistries [...] Being in th[is] Heideggerian sense is the Nothing'.<sup>380</sup> In the latter half of this chapter, I will return to her development of this argument and the philosophical support she implies Heidegger's analysis, perhaps *inadvertently*, lent Nazism. For the moment it will suffice to point out that almost two and a half decades after having published the 'Existenz' paper, the distinction Arendt drew in her lectures and seminars on Kant's political philosophy, between memory and imagination, also rested upon denying that the latter was in any sense time-bound. Memory, she wrote, is the means of making present that which has passed and, in similar fashion to our anticipations of the future that make present that which has yet to be, it involves detecting associations or making connections in time between that which no longer exists and that which still does. 'Imagination', on the other hand, she argued, 'does not need to be led by this

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379 Arendt, 'What is Existenz Philosophy?', 35–56.

380 Ibid., 46.

temporal association; it can make present at will whatever it chooses'.<sup>381</sup>

Consequently, she also believed imagination to be at the heart of that branch of metaphysics known as ontology which concerns itself, and here she echoed Kant, 'with what lies beyond physical reality and still, *in a mysterious way*, is given to the mind as the nonappearance [sic] in the appearances'.<sup>382</sup> Where however, she went beyond Kant in her existential adaptation of his critical philosophy was in believing that the 'nonappearance' in appearance that she had identified was essentially *spatial* as opposed to temporal in nature.

Before we consider the connection between imagination, a crucial aspect of Kant's critical philosophy, and ontology, schemata, space and totalitarianism I think the following points are worth making. First, Arendt was keen to highlight a note Kant attached to A120 in the first version of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in which he stated that 'Psychologists have hitherto failed to realise that imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself'.<sup>383</sup> This was a valuable observation for her, I think, because given that Kant conceived of the imagination as being not only a 'faculty' totally distinct from any other in the mind, but in addition not derivable from any other faculty either, for example, not derivable from reason or from understanding, this provided room to think in a way that was not dependent upon conventional rational analysis. So, for example, when it came to discussing Nazism and Stalinism her imagination (in a Kantian sense) exploited a schema quite at odds with what we might expect conventional thinking to have produced. For example, she explored a counter-historical '*subterranean* stream of European history' suggesting various

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381 Arendt, *LKPP*, 79.

382 Ibid., 80, emphasis added.

383 Kant, *CPR*, 144. Arendt quotes these exact words in *LKPP*, 82–83.

unlikely connections of which enlightened thinkers, she believed, were simply unaware. By enlightened thinkers Arendt appears to have had in mind those whose thinking reflected a liberal, rationalist and progressive approach to historiography.<sup>384</sup> And she also refused to categorise totalitarianism as simply another form of dictatorship, identifying it instead as a radically new political phenomenon based on terror, the destruction of individuality and, all importantly the obliteration of *public space*. In other words, it was the *schema* she employed that made it possible to identify (to perceive) the significance of features of both Nazism and Stalinism that she thought others had simply missed.

Secondly, and here Arendt jumped to a theme Kant developed in the third *Critique*, she argued that particulars or ‘examples’ as used in making judgements were analogous to the schemata he discussed elsewhere in his writings in relation to cognition. For Kant, schemata, of course, were supposed to be what connected on the one hand sensible intuitions and on the other the concepts and categories of understanding. Arendt stated:

In the *Critique of Judgement*, i.e., in the treatment of reflective judgements, where one does not subsume a particular under a concept, the example helps one in the same way in which the schema helped one to recognize the table as a table. The examples lead and guide us, and the judgement thus acquires “exemplary validity”.<sup>385</sup>

Thus, when we reflect on the word ‘courageous’, she noted, we envisage a particular, an example, ‘that contains in itself, or is supposed to contain, a concept or a general rule’.<sup>386</sup> Imagination is exercised here producing a schema, the general “image” that is

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384 Arendt, *OT*, 15.

385 Arendt, *LKPP*, 84.

386 Ibid.

only “visible” to the mind’s eye. It is this that makes the particular image recognisable at all. So an ancient Greek, she hypothesised, would, on hearing or using the word ‘courageous’, have conjured up an image of Achilles or one of the other heroes. That is, Achilles would have been made present even though he was absent, as it were. Similarly, describing somebody as ‘good’, Arendt observed, means that somewhere ‘in the back of our minds the example of Saint Francis or Jesus of Nazareth’ is likely to be present. (It is interesting in the light of my earlier discussion of her Jewishness that her examples here are of Christians.<sup>387</sup>) However, she went on to emphasise a further point when she adopted and adapted these Kantian ideas for her own political purposes.

Having already given two instances to establish the connection between examples and the role of the imagination she felt obliged to relate a third. She stated, ‘in the context of French history I can talk about Napoleon Bonaparte as a particular man; but the moment I speak about Bonapartism I have made an example of him’.<sup>388</sup> She continued:

The validity of this example will be restricted to those who possess the particular experience of Napoleon, either as contemporaries or as heirs to this particular tradition. Most concepts in the historical and political sciences are of this restricted nature; they have their origin in some particular historical incident, and we then proceed to make it “exemplary” – to see in the particular what is valid for more than one case.<sup>389</sup>

This is, I think, particularly important. What Arendt seems to have suggested here is that access to the *meaningful* past, on the one hand, and the *plausibility* of political

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387 Ibid.

388 Ibid.

389 Ibid., 84–85.

ideas on the other, are derived from particular experienced incidents. In this she was acknowledging that Kant had made a valuable distinction between determinant judgements in which particulars, he thought, were *subsumed* under a general rule and reflective judgements in which, conversely, the rule was *derived* from the particulars (B104).<sup>390</sup> To recall, I quoted her above as having stated that ‘[...] thought itself arises out of incidents of *living* experience [I interpret this to be consistent with particular events] and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings’.<sup>391</sup> In her own case, it was the experience of Nazism understood as one single event, and Stalinism as another, from which she was able to derive the concept of totalitarianism as a new political phenomenon.

One last point to note is this: schemata were not only crucial for perception but, Arendt recognised, they are the condition of being able to articulate something meaningful; that is, schemata make *communication* itself possible. The logical implication here seems to be that without the application of something resembling Kantian schemata in thinking about political and historical events, Arendt would have regarded herself as having been just as inhibited in her attempts to communicate the significance of the *Shoah* and the rupture in Western history it signified as the “enlightened” philosophers, historians and political scientists of whom she was so critical. It is clear from her seminar notes on the imagination, that she was employing, though adapting, Kantian ideas to indicate that the political voice is dependent upon something akin to the role the imagination plays in the critical philosophy, without which communication could not take place.

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<sup>390</sup> See Arendt, *KLPP*, 83.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, emphasis added. See footnote 62 above.

# 1 On the Importance of Equality and Plurality

In 1948, Hannah Arendt began working as executive director of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Organization (JCRO). The Organisation had been formed by a number of Jewish groups including the American Jewish Committee and the World Jewish Congress, and was successor to the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction. (The latter had itself replaced the Conference on Jewish Social Studies established in the early 1930s.) Arendt had been director of the Commission in 1944 at which time her remit had been ‘to prepare four instalments of a “Tentative List of Jewish Cultural Treasures in Axis-Occupied Countries” [to be] published in the 1946 to 1948 issues of *Jewish Cultural Studies*’.<sup>392</sup> The preparation of these lists required interviewing Jewish refugees who had worked in Europe in museums or schools, for example, or as librarians. The newly formed JCRO was charged with acting in a different capacity, though – that of temporary *custodian* of the hundreds of thousands of Jewish books, religious and cultural artefacts and artistic works, stolen by the Nazis from around 1934 onwards as part of their “research” into the impact of the Jews on German society or looted by clusters of special units, called ‘Sonderstäbe’, which accompanied the Nazi military machine as it moved across Europe.<sup>393</sup> Arendt, a representative of the JCRO, contributed to the effort to identify and locate the rightful owners of displaced items which included, in addition to books, works of fine art, historic musical instruments and manuscripts. Thousands of books were delivered, for example, to Austria’s National Library following the annexation of that country in March 1938 and the arrest and deportation to Dachau of its Director,

<sup>392</sup> Young-Breuhl, *Hannah Arendt*, 187.

<sup>393</sup> Willem de Vries, in his *Sonderstab Musik* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996) describes the organization of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR), which was responsible for the unlimited and systematic theft of artistic and cultural items in Europe, and in particular the functions of the Sonderstab Musik in France, Belgium and Holland after the Nazi invasion in June 1940. A number of Sonderstäbe were created by the Nazis, with special interests ranging from folklore, prehistory and churches, to the visual arts, music and theatre.



Dr Joseph Bick. His replacement, a confirmed Nazi, Dr Paul Heigl, devoted his energies 'to acquiring the stocks of Jewish-owned publishers and the private collections of many Jewish citizens' such as those of Serbia's foremost publisher, Geca Kon.<sup>394</sup> The restitution process is one that, sixty-five years after the end of the Second World War, is still far from complete. Only in 1992, for example, was the Dutch musicologist, Willem de Vries, able to locate in Nuremberg several missing manuscripts belonging to the late French composer Darius Milhaud.<sup>395</sup>

In February of 1949, the JCRO took delivery of some half a million books as a result of a signed agreement with the Offenbach Archival Depot on the basis that these 'unidentifiable items for which no claims had been received were to be distributed to public or quasi-public religious, cultural, or educational institutions. The materials were to be used in the interest of perpetuating Jewish art and culture'.<sup>396</sup> Under terms laid down in the Inter-Allied Agreement of 1945, they would pass from the JCRO's trusteeship to places of safety in either the countries from which they had originated, if these could be established or, if this proved impossible, they would be placed in alternative homes, most probably in the nascent state of Israel but, in America too.

Hannah Arendt's new supervisory role within the JCRO meant that she was now required not merely to conduct interviews with fellow refugees in her adopted home, the United States of America, but in order to prepare the reports required by the Organisation's president, Salo Baron, she needed to assess the situation on the ground, as it were, which meant travelling to Europe.<sup>397</sup> This she did between November 1949

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394 Richie Robertson, 'Literary Loot', in *The Times Literary Supplement* (11 March 2005), 13.

395 Ibid.

396 Martin Dean, *Offenbach Archival Depot: Restitution Operations and Disposal of Unidentified Items* [Website], available from: <<http://www.ushmm.org/oad/hist3.htm>> (Accessed 1 February 2005).

397 Baron was a historian and Professor of Jewish Studies at Columbia University between 1930 and 1963.

and March 1950. It was a trip that catapulted her back into the Old World for the first time since she had been forced to flee the Nazis a decade earlier. It was a trip that would also be somewhat risky, presenting personal challenges as a result of bringing her into contact again with her former teacher, Martin Heidegger, with whom, as we have already noted she had as a young student at Marburg been in love.

In some respects, the post-War Europe into which Hannah Arendt flew with all the wide-eyed excitement and anticipation of one who has never before experienced the wonders of flying in an aeroplane, was still the familiar world she had left behind: ‘Today, [met] Nina Gourfinkel, completely unchanged, like everything else in France’.<sup>398</sup> Other letters written during her relentless criss-crossing of the continent from her base in Wiesbaden and a report entitled, ‘The Aftermath of Nazi Rule’ published in October 1950, following her return to New York, paint a more considered picture of Europe four years after the end of the war. Paris, for example, unsettled her.<sup>399</sup> The French, she believed, had been made lazy by the money flowing into the country for reconstruction via the Marshall Plan. ‘They aren’t producing [...] practically no iron and steel production’.<sup>400</sup> London, on the other hand, was a hubbub of activity ‘bristling with life’.<sup>401</sup> The English, she thought, were hard-working, but not, as the Germans, to the point of becoming ‘dangerous’.<sup>402</sup> ‘Everything was very calm, quiet, friendly’.<sup>403</sup> The police, she observed, were ‘truly there to protect the public’. By way of contrast, she no doubt had in mind her experience of the French

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398 Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence Between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936–1968*, edited by Lotte Kohler and translated by Peter Constantine (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1996), 116.

399 Ibid., 127.

400 Ibid., 116.

401 Ibid., 114.

402 In ‘The Aftermath of Nazi Rule’, Arendt remarked that ‘their [the Germans’] present industriousness seems at first glance to give substance to the opinion that Germany is still the most dangerous European nation’. Hannah Arendt, ‘The Aftermath of Nazi Rule’, in *Commentary* 10 (1950): 342–353.

403 Ibid.

gendarmes in rounding up for deportation the foreign Jews in Paris after the defeat and division of France in June 1940, part of the ‘*Westfeldzug*’. (She was, perhaps, unaware of the failure of the British police to exercise their duty of care and protection when it came to the population of the Channel Islands in the spring of 1942 and early 1943. In compliance with the instructions of the German occupying authorities, Jews were told to report to the British authorities in order to be taken under police escort to the German military for subsequent deportation to Auschwitz and Buchenwald.<sup>404</sup>) It was Germany, however, which worried Arendt the most when she returned to Europe at the end of 1949. Save for Berlin, she described it as a shallow unreal world, a world deeply scarred by totalitarianism, whose inhabitants frantically sought to keep busy in order that reality be held safely at a *distance* (the spatial connotation is revealing given Arendt’s subsequent thoughts about the public sphere), its intellectuals ‘robbed of all spontaneous speech and comprehension’ making it a place ‘oppressed by a kind of pervasive public stupidity which cannot be trusted to judge correctly the most elementary events’.<sup>405</sup> The picture Arendt painted was of a country deprived of that ‘non-time-space’, the occasion or condition, of the possibility for thinking itself, that Arendt, as we have seen, would refer to in her ‘preface’ to *Between Past and Future*.<sup>406</sup>

It is clear from her letters home that, despite the many joys roaming about the world brought with it, the demands of this ‘dog’s work’ (*Hundsarbeit*) for the JCRO were draining in all manner of ways.<sup>407</sup> The itinerary, the rushing from place to place by car, by aeroplane, by train was physically tiring to the point, in early February 1950, of

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404 Lawrence Rees, *Auschwitz* (London: BBC Books, 2005), 145–149.

405 Hannah Arendt, ‘The Aftermath of Nazi Rule’, in *Commentary* 10 (1950): 345.

406 Arendt, *BPF*, 13.

407 Arendt and Blücher, *Within Four Walls*, 127. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 45.

‘slowly becoming unbearable’.<sup>408</sup> On top of this there were, of course, the regular reports which had to be written and sent off to Baron. Arendt was naturally homesick, testament, I think, to just how much America had, after a difficult start, now become *home*, a place that, unlike the similarly exiled Adorno, for instance, she did not long to escape from. A continuous flow of letters between her and Heinrich Blücher sustained them both. Their exchanges revolved around all manner of subjects – who Hannah had met on her travels, what was happening back at home in New York, how different members of their ‘tribe’ of friends were fairing as well as “serious” ideas, both political and philosophical. And the love she and Blücher had for each other is clearly felt in the strokes of affection and tenderness that each of them expressed in their regular dispatches to each other. Blücher’s letters ‘protected’ Arendt in the months she spent away and if the flow slowed temporarily because ‘Monsieur’, as Arendt was apt to refer to him, failed to send the one letter a week, at the very least, she *demande*d notwithstanding her continuous toing and froing and changes of address, she severely berated him.<sup>409</sup>

Arendt threw herself into her work, despite all the challenges it presented, with characteristic wholeheartedness. It was, however, not the only work concerned with ‘Jewish affairs’, in a practical sense, with which, over the past two decades, she had been absorbed. She had, for example, been a secretary with ‘Agriculture at Artisanat’ in 1930. This involved working with the hundreds of refugees fleeing both Germany and Eastern Europe who were looking for work in Paris. Then, following a spell with Baroness Germaine de Rothschild overseeing the contributions the Baroness was making to charitable organisations, Arendt joined another Jewish organisation, ‘Youth

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408 Arendt and Blücher, *Within Four Walls*, 127.

409 For example, see her letter to Blücher from Paris, dated 11 January 1950 (Ibid., 115–117).

Aliyah', whose task it had been to help Jews to migrate to Palestine. Two years prior to her directorship of the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction in 1944 she had formed, together with Joseph Maier, what was known as 'The Young Jewish Group' (*Die junge jüdische Gruppe*) which had called for the establishment of a Jewish Army and appealed 'to those who are convinced of the bankruptcy of past ideologies and are ready to tear out their hair in order to develop a new theoretical basis for Jewish politics'.<sup>410</sup> And there were her activities throughout the 1940s in support of a Palestinian political entity in which neither the Jews nor the Arabs would have had majority or minority status, and this brought her into collaboration, for a short while, with Judah Magnes and his campaign for a federal Palestine rather than separate Jewish and Arab states.<sup>411</sup>

In December 1945, Arendt was able to renew contact with the philosopher Karl Jaspers, who, as we have seen, had been her doctoral research supervisor. She and Jaspers had been out of touch throughout the war years, he not knowing what had happened to her after she fled from Germany first to Paris and then to the United States, she relieved now to learn that he and his wife had come 'through the whole hellish mess unharmed'.<sup>412</sup> In a letter, dated 2 December 1945, Jaspers mentioned that the first issue of *Die Wandlung*, his recently founded periodical, was ready to be published.<sup>413</sup> The journal was to remain in publication for only four years, but during its lifetime it included articles by contributors ranging from Bertold Brecht, to Martin Buber, Jean Paul Sartre to Thomas Mann. Jaspers wanted to know whether his former

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410 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 177. Young-Bruehl has the spelling as '*jungejüdische*' both in the main body of her text and in the index.

411 Ibid., see chapter 6.

412 Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926–1969*, edited by Lotte Kohler, and Hans Saner, translated by Robert and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992), 23.

413 Ibid., 25–27.

student, whose essays and articles in *Partisan Review* and *Politics* he had been reading, would write something for the journal. In a lengthy reply, dated 29 January 1946, Arendt expressed a certain discomfort with the invitation: ‘it is not an easy thing for me to contribute to a German journal’, she admitted.<sup>414</sup> The reason for this was bound up with the considerable numbers of Jews (in refugee camps inside and outside Germany) wishing to leave Europe behind altogether. This potential exodus troubled her. For herself, she declared:

If the Jews are able to stay in Europe, then they cannot stay as Germans or Frenchmen, etc, as if nothing had happened. It seems to me that none of us can return (and writing is surely a form of return) merely because people once again seem prepared to recognize Jews as Germans or something else. We can return only if we are welcome as Jews. That would mean that I would gladly write something if I can write as a Jew on some aspect of the Jewish question.<sup>415</sup>

This was a response from someone who had begun to recognise in the *Shoah* not purely a crime against the *Jewish* people alone, but rather, a crime against the whole of humanity, a crime which breached the *limits* of human existence by attempting to annihilate an entire race – who happened to be Jews. The breach of these boundaries, ontological ‘conditions’, as she was subsequently to describe them in *The Human Condition*, demonstrated that humans could now meddle, it seemed, with metaphysics itself, with the very *ontological* foundations of human life on earth, one of whose conditions was plurality. Arendt’s response to Jaspers mirrored views she had begun to express even when writing her doctoral dissertation. Amongst other significant essays which may be relevant to my discussion here, however, she also wrote a short

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414 Ibid., 31.

415 Ibid., 32.

piece entitled, 'Against Private Circles'.<sup>416</sup> In it she warned against the dangers of an exclusive Jewish education system. This time it was her commitment to *equality*, also traceable to the dissertation, that was her focus of attention.

Though in early 1933 Jewish children were not yet excluded from German schools – the Nuremberg Laws were not introduced until 1935 – by late April restrictions were being put on the *numbers* of Jews who could attend both schools and universities. Arendt referred to an 'emigration' of [Jewish] children from German schools but worried that if matters were left to 'wealthy Jewish families' alone to try and address, a system of exclusive Jewish education would more than likely be created that would pose great dangers in that it would encourage the very isolation of Jews that many had for a long time been resisting. Something 'urgent' was required. Of course, Arendt wrote, such a system of education had to promote understanding of Jewish history including the history of assimilation and of anti-Semitism. She called though, with no small measure of defiance, for Jewish schools not to succumb 'to a principle of racial purity'. A Jewish school 'must from the start', she recommended, 'be prepared to accept half- or quarter-Jews, that is, everyone who has been forced into its arms by the political situation'.<sup>417</sup> This was a somewhat unfortunate way of phrasing matters as her reference to 'half' and 'quarter-Jews' seemed to echo the National Socialist racist taxonomy of 'Jewishness'. Arendt's remarks however, were, I think, consistent with the earlier critical stance she had adopted in that she was confronting entrenched ideas within the Jewish community about what constituted being a Jew. Jew, 'half-Jew', 'quarter-Jew', it does not matter, I think she was arguing. To discriminate against those who were not acknowledged to be fully Jewish (in the sense of being children

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416 Arendt, 'Against Private Circles', *TJW*, 19–21.

417 *Ibid.*, 20.

born of mixed marriages) would be to put at risk what had been achieved through assimilation, ‘whatever one may think of this assimilation’. In other words, Jewish schools must be prepared to open their doors to all without discrimination. No Jewish child must feel cut off because of a sense of not belonging. Were this to happen because of a decision by Jewish community leaders Jews would be in ‘danger of [becoming] ‘alienat[ed] from *reality*’, the reality being that we live in a world in which all are equal.<sup>418</sup> The warning not to allow Jewish schools to discriminate against those deemed not to be fully Jewish was audacious but it was also consistent with Arendt’s commitment to counter-history, to her challenge to the hallowed words of the sacred texts and to the concept of election. It was, I think, an early demonstration of her growing commitment not just to pluralism but to equality too.

So, in her 1946 response to Jasper’s request for a learned paper Arendt was restating, I would contend, her commitment to values, already evident in her days as a research student and just after. And this in spite of her general attitude: ‘to be perfectly honest, it doesn’t matter to me in the least on the personal and individual level’ she had responded to Jaspers when he had asked her whether she regarded herself as a German or as a Jew.<sup>419</sup> What was important to her self-image was for her to appear as a Jew in *public*, to demonstrate ‘solidarity’ with other Jewish people, even if the nature of her personal commitment to being Jewish was very different to theirs.<sup>420</sup> When the chips were down, a phrase that she was fond of using, this was when it was important to be seen as a Jew, much like Marcel Proust, of whom she noted that ‘himself half Jewish [...] in emergencies [he was] ready to identify himself as a

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418 Ibid., emphasis added.

419 Ibid., 70.

420 In this regard, Margaret Betz Hull’s, *The Hidden Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), demonstrates much insight into Hannah Arendt’s “Jewishness”.



Jew'.<sup>421</sup> Accordingly, when one of her essays arrived on Jaspers' desk in March 1946, he was able to accommodate his former student's worries with ease. 'Your essay will appear in our *Wandlung* [...] A short note will convey, as you rightly request it should, that your point of view is entirely that of a Jew'.<sup>422</sup>

The key that unlocks the conundrum of Arendt's Jewishness is, in fact, the same key, I believe, that can be used to unlock the enigma of what she intended us to understand by the expression 'political'. It all comes down to considerations primarily of "space", a category through which much of Arendt's mature political thinking was filtered. As we have seen, she felt that there was no discrepancy at all in portraying herself, in public, as a Jew concerned with Jewish issues while in private the observance of Jewish laws and compliance with Jewish rituals and dietary restrictions were, with some qualifications it is true, all but irrelevant to her. That was because in public she perceived herself as appearing before others as the representative of a group of people which itself was one amongst a plurality of nations notwithstanding the fact that, even in America, as I will indicate below, it was a people against which *society* discriminated. And her pride in her Jewishness in this sphere, the public sphere, was intended to be a confirmation of that plurality. In private on the other hand, she appeared purely as an individual amongst her family and her friends – the 'tribe'. Her Jewishness there was ultimately of little, if any, significance because she was accepted, indeed loved, for who she was without having to fight her corner. Of course, it helped that, like Benjamin and Scholem, she had also been brought up in a comfortable assimilated bourgeois family unburdened by theological angst and not encumbered by the demands of daily religious ritual.

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421 Arendt, *OT*, 80.

422 Ibid., 35. It is unclear precisely which of Arendt's essays is being referred to by her and Jaspers.

Similarly, the meaning and significance she attached to acting ‘politically’ in contrast to say, moving in social circles, had the same rationale. It was all a matter of keeping things in their rightful place. In the 1940s, while her political analyses were still maturing, her “grievances” with *society* might have appeared defensive in a more personal than a political sense in that she seems to have believed that good manners as much as anything else threatened what she might attain intellectually. (‘Social nonconformism, is the *sine qua non* of intellectual achievement’.<sup>423</sup>) Writing to Jaspers after their reunion, in a letter already quoted from above, she observed, however: ‘As you see, I haven’t become respectable in any way. I’m more than ever of the opinion that a decent human existence is possible today only on the *fringes of society*, where one then runs the risk of starving or being stoned to death’. She continued: ‘If I had wanted to become respectable, I would either have had to give up my interest in Jewish affairs or not marry a non-Jewish man, either option equally inhuman and in a sense crazy’.<sup>424</sup> This was more than just a throw-away comment. There was good reason for her to be prickly in nineteen fifties America. Good manners it seems, had much to do with one’s attitude to the Jews and to being Jewish. This was corroborated in 1958 when, for instance, only a few years after the publication of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the production company of the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith released a short educational film entitled ‘An American Girl, The Problems of Prejudice’. A little less than half an hour long, the film was ‘dedicated to America’s teen-agers [sic] and to their unerring instinct for juvenile *decency*’. It sought to confront the effects of anti-Semitism tangible within American society. Supposedly ‘based on *actual* incidents that happened in a *real* town

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423 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, xv.

424 Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence*, 29, emphasis added.

with *real* people' the film portrayed events involving a non-Jewish American adolescent by the name of Norma Davis who was introduced to viewers reading the Diary of Anne Frank in the comfort of her middle class family home. Norma's problems start when she is attracted by and purchases a bracelet to which is attached a Star of David. Believing the star to be a good luck charm and wearing the bracelet every day, Norma loses her school friends, as a result. Even her *best* friends, Lucile and Wendy, shun her, and her relationship with her boyfriend becomes strained. The film tries to show that despite what Norma's father says when he sees her reading Anne Frank's diary, "The war is over. The Nazis are finished. This kind of thing doesn't happen anymore', prejudice and discrimination were alive and well in America.<sup>425</sup>

Reaffirming her philosophical commitment to both equality and pluralism, by demanding she be identified as a *Jewish* contributor to *Die Wandlung*, was therefore, not at all dissimilar from Hannah Arendt's resolve not to be bound by social rules, expectations, manners or prejudices, in the broadest sense. There was no contradiction in avowing her Jewishness in the public *political* sphere, as she would subsequently refer to it, while at the same time renouncing rabbinic injunctions or cocking a snook at *social* prejudice and intolerance. Arendt's *Report* on the Eichmann trial written in the early nineteen sixties troubled many and even lost her friends. Amongst her critics was Gershon Scholem who reproached her for failing to demonstrate, on the one hand, 'Ahabath Israel', that is 'love of the Jewish people', and on the other 'Herzenstakt' or 'sympathy'. Nonetheless, he still tried to claim her 'wholly as a

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425 'An American Girl, The Problems of Prejudice', a Presentation of the Audio-Visual Divison of the Dearborn, Michigan Department of Libraries, produced by the Production Company: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1958, available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TE9A—3yOwE&feature=related> (Accessed 1 March 2010).

daughter of our people and in no other way'.<sup>426</sup> Arendt responded somewhat dismissively:

I have never in my life “loved” any people or collective – neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love only my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons. Secondly, this “love of the Jews” would appear to me, since I am myself Jewish, as something rather suspect. I cannot love myself or anything which I know is part and parcel of my own person. [...] I do not “love” the Jews, nor do I “believe” in them; I merely belong to them as a matter of course, beyond dispute or argument.<sup>427</sup>

For Arendt, it was entirely possible to be a proud Jew yet not to love the Jewish people in the sense of feeling honour bound to defend, in public, everything Jewish as a matter of course. It was possible too, for a decent and human life to be led in which, for one and the same individual, political integrity might happily coexist with social indiscretion. She would reaffirm her views on this a few years later when she became involved in the open debate over the issue of segregation at Little Rock, Arkansas. It was, for Arendt, all a matter of which space one happened to be occupying, which sphere one was moving in at any particular moment, that counted.

## 2 On Spatiality and Temporality

That Arendt came to attach such importance to what I am labelling considerations of spatiality over all others, I would argue, was at root the product of her having been so taken with Kantian transcendental philosophy. The Transcendental Aesthetic in the first *Critique* was, of course, where Kant gave space its fullest treatment. However, it

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<sup>426</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘The Jew as Pariah’, in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, edited by Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 242.

<sup>427</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘A Letter to Gershom Scholem’ (24 July 1963) in *Hannah Arendt: The Jewish Writings*, edited by Jerome Kohn & Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 467.

was in reaction to Heidegger, with whom she had studied during the crucial years in which he was working on time and being and composing *Being and Time*, that her initial thoughts about space, I would contend, began to take shape. Being, as Heidegger understood it, and as I have indicated above, was lived not just *in* time, as if the latter were an abstract flow, something external to the self, but was, crucially, *temporally constituted*. Dasein's being, as Heidegger framed it, *is* time. Its temporality is key to both its self-transcendence and to the unconcealment of Being through the questions it, Dasein or being, poses. Being temporally constituted, life is not passively conducted, but therefore involves the *organisation* of time as such, much as music involves the organisation of time in terms of rhythm and melody. As Michael Wood and Robert Bernasconi have noted:

An existential account of temporality is essentially participatory. It treats subjects both as embodied – and thus from the beginning “in-the-world” – and as mortal. It is participatory in the sense that it claims that we are temporal in our very being and that the most basic temporal patterns which affect us are not those that organise the persisting objects around us, but those that involve our actions and our self-understanding as finite beings.<sup>428</sup>

When we consider Arendt's thought and writings though, it is an existential account of *spatiality* as much as temporality that she can be detected as having emphasised because it was space, and the ways in which men protect and organise it and shape their affairs within it, that she believed was fundamental to understanding and making judgements about how they conduct themselves in the world. It was the issue of spatiality that, just as much as temporality, would come to dominate her *ontological* perspective in regard to the human condition.

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<sup>428</sup> David Wood, & Robert Bernasconi, *Time and Metaphysics: A Collection of Original Papers* (Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick, Coventry: Parousia Press, 1982), 18.

By the 1940s, the “being question”, to which Arendt had initially been exposed while with Heidegger in the 1920s began to take on a new significance for her. In contrast to Heidegger, she now began distancing herself even further from his largely temporal interrogation of Being. It was not the Heideggerian ‘horizon’ conducive to *Being’s* temporal unconcealment that she regarded as being all important. Her former teacher’s *environmental* concern with Dasein and with ‘being-with-one-another’, in her own work was transformed into a consideration of the *political* conditions of *being with others*. And what this meant was that she began to forefront the spatial possibilities for human togetherness in non-practical terms in contrast to what Heidegger himself had sought to establish.

Heidegger had not neglected to think about space in *Being and Time*. Indeed, as we have seen, he had discussed Dasein’s worldliness ‘as Being in-the-world’ and he had acknowledged that Dasein is essentially ‘de-severance’ – that is, it is ‘spatial’. He stated that, Dasein had ‘discovered a “world”’ and ‘that [...] Being-in-the-world is spatial’.<sup>429</sup> In his development of ‘The Worldhood of the World’, Division One of *Being and Time*, several sections are actually devoted to considering space and Dasein’s spatiality. For Heidegger, Dasein essentially was spatial and existed spatially and it existed spatially in a very anti-Cartesian sense. Descartes had mathematised space, making it possible to fix spatial locations according to co-ordinates in relation to which Dasein and objects in the world could then be *measured*. Heidegger, on the other hand, discussed Dasein’s ‘spacial relations with objects as a matter of near or far, close and distant’.<sup>430</sup> And how near to or far away from Dasein an object was,

429 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 145.

430 Stephen Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being and Time* (London: Routledge, 1996), 52.

impacted upon that object's *practical* purpose, its 'handiness and unhandiness'.<sup>431</sup>

However, by the mid-nineteen forties and with the publication of Arendt's 'Existenz Philosophy' paper it was becoming apparent that there were significant differences in their understandings of spatiality that separated Arendt's ontological perspective from that of Heidegger's, even though she too rejected Descartes' pure co-ordinate approach. Fundamental to understanding their differences is, I would argue, the fact of Heidegger's emphasis of the connection between spatiality and practicality.

Heidegger observed in *Being and Time*:

Whenever one comes across equipment, handles it, or moves it around or out of the way, some region has already been discovered. Concernful Being-in-the-world is directional – self-directive. [However,] relationships of involvement are intelligible only within the horizon of a world that *has been disclosed*. Their horizontal character, moreover, is what first makes possible the specific horizon of the "whither" of belonging-somewhere regionally [...] a bringing close (de-severing) of the ready-to-hand and present-at-hand [is] grounded in a making-present of the unity of that temporality in which directionality too becomes possible.<sup>432</sup>

What this indicated was that the spatiality of Dasein fundamentally involved its positioning itself in the vicinity of objects as demanded by the specific requirements of its *practical* endeavours. This already *presupposed* though, what Heidegger labelled the 'work-world'.<sup>433</sup> More than this, however, it presupposed the world as such, which he argued has to be understood *temporally*. This suggests that spatiality was regarded by Heidegger as in some sense deferential to temporality.

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431 Ibid., 53.

432 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 70: 420, emphasis added.

433 Ibid., 26: 153.

In fact, in *Being and Time* Heidegger did subsume spatiality under temporality. He stated, for example, that '[t]emporality is the meaning of the Being of care. Dasein's constitution and its ways to be are possible ontologically only on the basis of temporality [...]. Hence Dasein's specific spatiality must be *grounded in* temporality'.<sup>434</sup> It was with this grounding of spatiality in temporality and the interpretation of the former in terms only of practical activities alone that, I would argue, Hannah Arendt took issue. In her later distinction drawn between the practical activities of the private realm as opposed to the entirely non-practical activities she associated with the public realm we can see how she tried to discuss *modes* of spatiality in a more distinctive, in a more fundamentally human way, than Heidegger. And in indicating a 'non-time' space, to which I have previously referred, we can see, I believe, how she also sought to release spatiality from its Heideggerian grounding in temporality. These are themes to which I will return.

Arendt's "political turn" had begun to take on some prominence with her columns in the American German-language newspaper *Aufbau* to which she began contributing from the middle of November 1941 onwards.<sup>435</sup> Her articles included, for example, 'Active Patience' (28 November, 1941), written in the wake of the British government's refusal to create a Jewish army and 'The Devil's Rhetoric' (8 May 1942) in which she chided the Allies over what appeared to her to be a 'conspiracy of silence about the fate of the Jews'.<sup>436</sup> New political heights were reached, however, with the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a book that she had been researching and writing for some five years before its completion around September

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434 Ibid., 70: 418, emphasis added.

435 She had, a little earlier than this, on 25 October 1941, written an 'open letter' to the bulletin which had attracted the attention of its editor, Manfred George, suggesting her potential as a journalist. See Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 169.

436 Arendt, *TJW*, 156.



1949. Her experience of Nazism and her reflections on the book after its completion had, as I have previously intimated, the impact of an epiphany: ‘Finally, it dawned on me that I was not engaged in writing an historical book, even though large parts of it clearly contain historical analyses, but a political book’.<sup>437</sup> What I believe she meant by this, was that she had come to realise that she had not been writing *historie* at all, but that her analyses had thrown into relief something much deeper that had more to do with *Geschichte* on the one hand, and spatiality, ontologically understood as the very core of the political, on the other hand. Arendt had, with the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* come of “political” age. The detail of the *ontological* foundations underpinning and distinguishing *political* from non-political activity would have to await a further publication, *The Human Condition*, for their clarification. However, what is clear is that with *The Origins* Arendt had begun to find a political voice and was interrogating Being in a manner that distinguished her from Heidegger in that she was raising questions which, demonstrated her unease in regard to *Being and Time*’s treatment of spatiality as much as its treatment of temporality.<sup>438</sup>

The title, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was, in itself, misleading giving the impression that the author was going to concern herself with or would reveal the *precise* causes of what she was labelling an entirely new form of government. Arendt was actually intent upon investigating what she had identified as ‘the subterranean stream of Western history’, much to the bemusement of her friends and critics alike but, she expressed no wish to try and unearth, to pinpoint in terms of a specific

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<sup>437</sup> See footnote 374 above.

<sup>438</sup> ‘*Die Schatten*’, ‘The Shadows’, is the title of a piece of early self-reflection that Hannah Arendt undertook. She gave the handwritten text to Heidegger in Kassel in April 1925.

moment in time, that is, the causes of Nazism and Stalinism, because this was simply impossible.<sup>439</sup> Her intention to identify a ‘subterranean stream of Western history’ indicated instead, something Nietzschean, the quest for a more *genuine* history. As noted previously, the tripartite structure of *The Origins* resembled *On the Genealogy of Morality*. And, similar to Nietzsche, who expressed a wish ‘to isolate the different roots of that complex structure that is called morality’, Arendt hoped to isolate that conglomeration of elements that produced totalitarianism.<sup>440</sup> Thus, like the *Genealogy*, the separate ‘treatises’, as it were, that comprise *The Origins* ‘should be regarded as parts of a unified theory and critique’.<sup>441</sup> It is not purely the structure of *The Origins*, however, that suggest something Nietzschean. Arendt’s approach, like her predecessor’s, involved *re-evaluation* too, in her case of anti-Semitism, for example, which, in the first part of the book she argued was, in the twentieth century, completely different from previous manifestations in that it was essentially political, not at all, contrary to common perception, motivated by religious antagonisms. And what about totalitarianism itself? This too required to be re-evaluated. Its interpreters were missing the point completely. Nazism, for example, was not simply dictatorship by another name; it was something unique in terms of government, a political phenomenon never before witnessed in the course of human history. Indeed, its consequences would have an indisputably deep historical impact, according to Arendt.

In addition to comparisons that can be made with Nietzsche, however, there were in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, also immensely strong echoes of Kant, once again. In

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439 Arendt, *OT*, ix.

440 Friedrich Nietzsche, cited in David Owen, *Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morality* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007), 67.

441 Ibid.

the preface to the first *Critique* Kant had stated ‘that reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own, and [...] it must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature’s leading strings, but must itself show the way with principles of judgement based upon fixed laws, constraining nature to give answer to questions of reason’s own determining’ (Bxiii).<sup>442</sup> This implied, as we have seen previously, that though arising out of experience, Kant believed knowledge is not based solely upon it, as the manifold of experience has to be interpreted or processed by concepts and categories – ‘principles of judgement’. For Kant, one such principle or category was permanence. A further extract from the first *Critique* concerning permanence may help clarify Arendt’s own position. Kant defined it as,

what alone makes possible the representation of the transition from one state to another, and from not being to being. These transitions can be empirically known only as changing determinations of that which is permanent. If we assume that something absolutely begins to be, we must have a point in time in which it was not. But to what are we to attach this point, if not to that which already exists? For a preceding empty time is not an object of perception. But if we connect the coming to be with things which previously existed, and which persist in existence up to the moment of coming to be, this latter must be simply a determination of what is permanent in that which precedes it (B231).<sup>443</sup>

In other words, what is permanent serves as the *condition of the possibility* of identifying change because change amounts to alteration in terms of what already is in permanent existence. Absolute beginning, in the sense of an initial starting point or origin of something taken in isolation to that which already has stable existence, that which is permanent, is therefore, incomprehensible. ‘By definition’, as Catherine

Labio observes, ‘origins and permanence are antithetical’.<sup>444</sup>

<sup>442</sup> Kemp Smith, *Kant’s Critique*, 20.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>444</sup> Labio, *Origins*, 140.

It is my contention that Arendt too, thought about transition in this way, that is in relation to permanence, and that this, in a rudimentary sense, reflected, as we shall see, a critical attitude towards historical reasoning. As we have already noted, however, she did not just adopt but she also adapted Kant's transcendental philosophy to the existential requirements of her own evolving political ideas. In this context, I believe she took the position that transition, 'the flux of change', as she described it, implied the ever changing and ever changeable affairs of men as they are acted out in multifarious manifestations and scenarios across the ages, frequently described and remarked upon, of course, by historians and political analysts amongst numerous other commentators. Permanence, on the other hand, suggested to her 'a framework of stability' indicated by the legal systems which superintend, as it were, the affairs of men. In her essay on civil disobedience collected in *Crises of the Republic*, published some years after both *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, she stated:

No civilization [...] would ever have been possible without a framework of stability, to provide the wherein for the flux of change. Foremost among the stabilizing factors, more enduring than customs, manners and traditions, are the legal systems that regulate our life in the world and our daily affairs with each other. [...] The variety of such systems is great, both in time and in space, but they all have one thing in common – the thing that justifies us in using the same word for phenomena as different as the Roman *lex*, the Greek *nomos*, the Hebrew *torah* – and that is that they were designed to ensure stability.<sup>445</sup>

However, we must be cautious about precisely what Arendt wanted us to understand by this statement, in particular, we must be attuned to what she had in mind, or at least

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445 Hannah Arendt, 'Civil Disobedience', in *Crises of the Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 64.

what she did not have in mind, when referring to ‘legal systems’. The clue is in what she later wrote in *The Human Condition* where she observed:

The law originally was identified with th[e] boundary line [between households], which in ancient times was still actually a space, a kind of no man’s land between the private and the public, sheltering and protecting both realms while, at the same time, separating them from each other. The law of the *polis*, to be sure, transcended this understanding from which, however, it retained its original spatial significance. The law of the city-state was neither the content of political action [...] nor was it a catalogue of prohibitions, resting, as all modern laws still do, upon the Thou Shalt Nots of the Decalogue. It was quite literally a wall, without which there might have been an agglomeration of houses, a town (*asty*), but not a city, a political community.<sup>446</sup>

Thus, for Arendt, stability was inextricably bound up with the nature and shape of what she would come to describe as the ontologically underwritten spatial conformations in which human activities take place in the world. It is the existence of and men’s attitude towards (and, their degree of contempt for) the public, private and social spheres in which their activities are “enclosed” and conducted that, for Arendt, was the key to understanding and making judgements that could be communicated to others about what it is men do (‘What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing’<sup>447</sup>), and how they might be with one another. In other words, she was perceiving human relations as much in spatial as in temporal terms, but the nature of the spaces she was beginning to identify departed from Heidegger’s analysis in *Being and Time*. The schemata, which made possible an understanding of events that she could communicate to others, conjoined her own lived experiences with her developing philosophical ideas, by grounding both in

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<sup>446</sup> Arendt, *HC*, 63–64.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

spatiality. So, for example, her emerging political *theory* was founded upon the identification of spatial distinctions between the public, private and social realms while she perceived Nazism and Stalinism as prime *examples* of an insane desire to destroy the very public space that served as a condition for *being with others* in a political sense.

*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in some ways is similar to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* too, of which it has been remarked that it combined 'the transcendence of the conventional book form [...] with the blasting apart of pragmatic historicism – grounded, as this always is, on the premise of a continuous and homogeneous temporality'.<sup>448</sup> Certainly *The Origins*, is a book that struck, and continues to strike, many readers as an eccentric disconnected and meandering work, to say the very least. However, I would argue that this is short-sighted because what Arendt was doing in this book was, similar to Benjamin, drilling down into the past in counter-historical fashion, and bringing to the surface from their original subterranean, and therefore no longer visible contexts, much as he did with his collectibles, remnants of seemingly disconnected information that she judged combined to disclose "a world of secret affinities".<sup>449</sup> Arendt's counter-historical approach in *The Origins*, a book researched in the late nineteen forties, reflected her similar approach to her doctoral dissertation completed two decades earlier.

We get a sense of what Arendt's concern with spatiality involved when we consider what she wrote, for example, about the perpetual motion of totalitarian dictatorships,

Trotsky's ideal of 'permanent revolution'. She described the absurd paradox the

448 From the translator's 'Forward' to, Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by H. Eiland, & K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), xi.

449 Ibid., x-xi.

totalitarian dictator faces because, on the one hand, he (or she) is attempting to create a new governmental entity with its own laws and institutions, yet, on the other hand, ‘he [or she] must prevent this new world from developing a new stability’.<sup>450</sup> There must be constant movement, continuous instability, the obliteration of boundaries realised through world domination. ‘The moment [...] revolutionary institutions bec[o]me a national way of life [...] totalitarianism would lose its “total” quality and become subject to the law of the nations according to which each possesses a specific territory, people, and historical tradition.’<sup>451</sup> Borders no longer serve their traditional purpose then, spatial divisions and their boundaries have to be erased. This hunger for expansion, this impossible yearning to acquire even the heavens themselves if only this were possible, because, as Cecil Rhodes declared, ““Expansion is everything””, characterised the heady imperialism of the nineteenth century’s ‘scramble for Africa’ with which totalitarianism has, in this sense, something in common.<sup>452</sup> Rhodes ‘had discovered’, Arendt wrote, ‘the moving principle of the new, imperialist era’ and then she provided a thought-provoking list of the territorial acquisitions and the accompanying increases in population that applying this principle made possible for such nation-states as Britain, France, Germany and Belgium.<sup>453</sup> It was a crazy principle, however, and Rhodes was aware of this, she noted. He ‘recognized [...] its inherent insanity’, but not because of economic or commercial considerations. Rather, and her observation here prefigured an ontology yet to be committed to print, it was because even he understood the ‘contradiction’ of such a principle ‘to the *human condition*’.<sup>454</sup> The intimation here, I would suggest, is precisely that the principle of

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450 Arendt, *OT*, 391.

451 Ibid.

452 Arendt, *OT*, 124. Arendt quotes Rhodes famous comment that were it possible he ‘would annex the planets’.

Ibid.

453 Ibid.

454 Ibid., emphasis added.

expansion, of aggrandizement, is a principle at odds with all respect for boundaries, with the idea that spatiality could and should be inviolable because it is the essence of stability. The principle of expansion, that is, was seen by Arendt as being inimical to ‘the framework of stability’ within which human action and motions can take place, which is a determination of spatiality.

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* in each of its three divisions, is very much a thesis that returns again and again to the concept of spatiality, I think, as the *condition for being with others*, until ultimately it addresses the brutal offensive upon public political space that, Arendt argued, takes place whenever totalitarian regimes, like those in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, seek to obliterate all signs of human plurality. Nowhere was this more true than when its author discussed the relationship between ‘The Jews and Society’, for example, in the third chapter of the first part of the book. While Arendt reserved her admiration for those Jews who remained, like the pariah, on the ‘fringes of society’, something as we have seen, she herself aspired to achieve, she directed her scorn at those other nineteenth-century Jews, the parvenu, who ‘exchanged equal rights for personal privileges’ in an attempt to gain a passport into a society that otherwise shunned them.<sup>455</sup> Yet, ‘the social destinies of average Jews [by definition the majority] were determined by their eternal lack of decision’ and they must have ended up living, she concluded, ‘in a twilight of favour and misfortune and knew with certainty only that both success and failure were inextricably connected with the fact that they were Jews.’<sup>456</sup> To put it another way, they just did not know, in a sense, which way to turn, which sphere it was “proper” for them to occupy.

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455 Ibid., 66–67.

456 Ibid., 67.



In contrast, Rahel Varhagen, had, in eighteenth-century Berlin, engaged in an experiment – ultimately it petered out – to create a unique type of space, a *social* space, which nonetheless stood ‘outside of official society’.<sup>457</sup> A Jewess, who, largely owing to her Jewishness was unable to gain access to official society, Rahel established a Salon in which a Hohenzollern prince like Louis Ferdinand might, as we have seen, find himself gossiping with a writer of the Romantic school such as Friedrich Schlegel or parleying with a political publicist and diplomat like Friedrich Gentz, because in this and similar meeting places ‘nothing really mattered but personality and the uniqueness of character, talent, and expression’.<sup>458</sup> Charming as this “social” experiment was however, one senses that Arendt was sceptical about what it might have achieved even if it had survived beyond 1806 when, as a result of military defeat and the institution of Napoleonic legislation which changed the fortunes of the Jews for the better, its death knell was sounded and its ‘innocence and splendour’ were doomed to be no more.<sup>459</sup> This was because, Arendt’s contention ran, the Jews, irrespective of whether they were desirous of entering *official* society or of creating an alternative social space open to all without restriction, missed the point entirely that *social* anti-Semitism was not actually the most significant threat that faced them; a source of humiliation and misfortune maybe, it was *political* anti-Semitism, Arendt judged, that was the real danger. The public space was where equality and plurality really mattered. That is, the tendency was for Jews themselves to attach far too much importance to entering a society, which, more often than not only let individual Jews in because they were either odd to some degree, and a source of amusement and entertainment, or eccentric or simply risqué. In showing society such respect, the Jews had, with what would be disastrous consequences for them,

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457 Ibid., 66.

458 See footnote 102 above.

459 Ibid.

Arendt believed, pinned their hopes on achieving “membership” of the “wrong” sort of space.<sup>460</sup>

The first part of *The Origins* then, boils down to Arendt’s concerns about the nature of anti-Semitism in relation to the threats or pseudo-threats posed to the Jews by lack of political engagement on the one hand and social exclusion on the other. Part two, in contrast, having begun with the immense hunger for territorial and commercial gain displayed by nineteenth-century imperialists in Britain, France, Germany and Belgium, for example, continues with a series of twists and turns of its own to consider the consequences of the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian empire, for example, and the apparent demise of one type of political space in particular, namely the nation-state. Though, once again, this is to reduce to its barest essentials what Arendt discussed in great detail using philosophical, psychological and sociological analyses, which included numerous examples, we might summarise the second part of *The Origins* as a whole as the author’s analysis of the consequences of ineluctable pressure put on political and legal entities to continue to provide stability and give protection in the face not only of international conflict on a scale previously unseen, but disintegrating empires, the collapse of the class system, and the appearance of millions of displaced persons on the world stage too. In regard to the latter, what this ‘scum of the earth’, illustrated was the complete ineffectiveness human rights because, according to Arendt, such rights, which are supposedly guaranteed by the Declaration of Human Rights established in the eighteenth century are, in her estimation, ‘unenforceable’.<sup>461</sup> Without a home of their own, without the security provided by their former political communities, the millions of Germans, Jews,

460 Arendt believed that in Europe social anti-Semitism ‘had little influence on the rise of political antisemitism’. *OT*, 55.

461 Arendt, *OT*, 267.

Hungarians, Poles, Russians and so forth uprooted by war, showed only too clearly ‘that loss of national rights was identical with loss of human rights, that the former inevitably entailed the latter’.<sup>462</sup> Arendt was in no sense defending the nation-state system when she argued this, indeed she was critical of it, but what she did want to demonstrate was the significance that attachment to, and not simply association with, an entity defined by distinct political borders ultimately had. If you were a German or a Russian or Polish national, for example, you were protected, she argued, under that country’s national law. She quoted Burke, who wrote of ‘an “entailed inheritance” of rights which one transmits to one’s children like life itself’, and who also referred to ‘the “rights of an Englishman”’.<sup>463</sup> However, because of a ‘paradox involved in the declaration of inalienable human rights’ if you were a German, Russian or Polish *refugee*, you were definitely not protected because the anomaly in the declaration ‘was that it reckoned with an “abstract” human being who seemed to exist *nowhere*, [and even] savages lived’, she observed, ‘in some kind of social order’.<sup>464</sup>

At least one of the logical conclusions we can draw from the second part of *The Origins* then, is that the rights of any individual are inextricably bound up with his or her membership of a public political entity (or, in abstract terminology, spatial conformation) and that attempts by well-intentioned jurists and humanitarians to protect *stateless* individuals via the declaration of universal and inalienable human rights demonstrated that, at precisely the moment they were most needed, or as Arendt might have said, when the chips were down, these rights were “flaky”, to say the least.

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462 Ibid., 292.

463 Ibid., 299.

464 Ibid., 291, emphasis added.

The third part of Arendt's first major political publication moved away from this analysis to focus on the brutal, indeed malevolent, assault upon the public sphere mounted by Nazism and Stalinism, the attempt, that is, to obliterate the very space that Arendt regarded as a necessary condition for protecting the rights of the individual. Part three of *The Origins* does not make for pleasant reading. Arendt's analysis of, for example, the destruction of what she described as the 'juridical person in man' and of 'moral man' is nothing if not disturbing.<sup>465</sup> She wrote:

The real horror of the concentration and extermination camps lies in the fact that the inmates, even if they happen to keep alive, are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they had died, because terror enforces oblivion.<sup>466</sup>

A little further on she continued:

It is not so much the barbed wire as the skillfully manufactured unreality of those whom it fences in that provokes such enormous cruelties and ultimately makes extermination look like a perfectly normal measure. Everything that was done in the camps is known to us from the world of perverse, malignant fantasises. The difficult thing to understand is that, like such fantasies, these gruesome crimes took place in a phantom world, which, however, has materialized, as it were, into a world which is complete with all sensual data of reality but lacks that structure of consequence and responsibility without which reality remains for us a mass of incomprehensible data. The result is that a place has been established where men can be tortured and slaughtered, and yet neither the tormentors nor the tormented, and least of all the outsider, can be aware that what is happening is anything more than a cruel game or an absurd dream.<sup>467</sup>

In the dark and despairing *private* world of the concentration and extermination camps the victims were so effectively cut off, by their captors, not just from their

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465 Ibid., 447.

466 Ibid., 443.

467 Ibid., 445–446.

friends and family but from all of the outside world, that they were reduced to a state in which they felt ‘as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them were no longer of any interest to anybody, as if they were already dead and some evil spirit gone mad were amusing himself by stopping them for a while between life and death before admitting them to eternal peace’.<sup>468</sup> If this in itself was a crime, though as Arendt contended in respect of the accusation of murder, the unprecedented nature of Nazi atrocities exploded our legal, moral and political concepts to such an extent as to make such a charge meaningless, it was only part of the macabre story. In addition to removing millions of human beings from the public political sphere and pressing them into a mass within the camps in which the world once common to them as well as the space between them was now utterly and completely destroyed, what remained of the public sphere was also turned by the Nazis into ‘a fictitious, topsy-turvy world’ of unreality. Such a world was characterised by, for example, a willingness on the part of the vast majority of the non-totalitarian population to acquiesce in (Arendt argued, they ‘shirked’ their responsibilities) and turn a blind eye to what amounted to ‘real insanity’. ‘This common-sense disinclination to believe the monstrous’, she stated, ‘is constantly strengthened by the totalitarian ruler himself, who makes sure that no reliable statistics, no controllable facts and figures are ever published, so that there are only subjective, uncontrollable, and unreliable reports about the places of the living dead’.<sup>469</sup> Furthermore, unpredictability about who might next be ‘declared unfit to live’, that is, selected at random as opposed even to being unjustly accused and found guilty of some apparent crime like being a “counter-revolutionary” against the Soviet state or of being some sort of “undesirable”, as the Nazis labelled the mentally ill,

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468 Ibid., 445

469 Ibid., 437.

created an atmosphere of ‘consistent arbitrariness’ that served to abrogate ‘human freedom’ and certainly destroyed any vestige of open *public* protest.

My argument thus far in the current chapter has been that a combination of Kantian ideas existentially adapted, as I have previously observed, and the emerging ontological perspective that humans are beings whose every moment of existence is conducted in some sort of spatial conformation, enabled Hannah Arendt to forge connections between a manifold of otherwise ‘inconceivable analogies’ (Benjamin) and apparently unrelated happenings that ultimately helped her to make sense of and communicate what appeared to be incomprehensible atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis.<sup>470</sup> The idea of spatiality that was key to Arendt’s *imaginative* thinking however, and the Nazi “crimes” against humanity that I have only been able to touch upon in my text, were merely part of her argument. The concept of plurality was, of course, as we have seen, also central to her thinking and it was this concept together with her imaginative application of ideas about spatiality that disclosed a further Nazi crime, one which has been described as a crime against humanity but which additionally, surely counts in Arendtian terms, as a crime against Being, that is, a crime against ontology.

### 3     Ontology and its Enemies

If Hannah Arendt was unconcerned about social and religious comments from others relating to her private life it was testament to the bond of friendship she had with Jaspers that she was very anxious about what his reaction would be to the fact that she had been intimately involved with Heidegger in the mid-nineteen twenties while still

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470 Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism’, in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, Part 1 1927–1930*, translated by Rodney Livingstone and Others, and edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 211.

his student and wanted to make him, Jaspers, aware of everything. Jaspers was something of a father figure for Arendt, someone who she very much respected. In 1945 when she had first started corresponding with him again after the war she was nervous about his learning of things she had thought or done since they had last been in contact that would ‘put [him] off’.<sup>471</sup> She told him that ‘there is hardly anything I’ve done that I didn’t do without thinking how I would tell you about it or justify it to you’.<sup>472</sup> How then, would he react when learning that she and Heidegger had been lovers? When, finally, all was revealed, Jaspers’ reaction was made, as she wrote in a letter to her husband dated 18 December 1949 ‘with openmindedness [sic] and [...] trust’ and in an ‘entirely inimitable [...] unflappable’ fashion.<sup>473</sup> Meeting with Jaspers in Europe at the end of the nineteen forties was, therefore, a very significant moment in her life.

Yet, despite this and despite, for example, her achievements on behalf of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, the excitement of her visits to England, France, Switzerland and West Germany, her delight at seeing old friends after so long – Alexandre Koyré, Jean Wahl, and Ann Weil amongst them – it was the reunion in Freiburg, with Martin Heidegger, around which Arendt’s entire extended European trip at the end of 1949 seemed, in a sense, to revolve. Arendt never acknowledged this. Actually, and there is no reason to doubt her sincerity, it was, indeed, her meeting with Jaspers that apparently affected her more than anything else. As she wrote to him from New York in April 1950:

The few weeks that I have been back have flown by.  
Much of that time has been spent, of course, in

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<sup>471</sup> Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondence*, 23.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid.

<sup>473</sup> Cited in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 246.

lengthy talks about Basel. With the trip in the immediate past, I realize more clearly now than I could during those hectic months how much it centred around my visit with you in Basel. That always fresh joy of being able to speak without reservation, a happiness that I otherwise know only at home and that has become a vital factor of my world because it is once again possible (outside one's own home, which one has, after all, constructed oneself).<sup>474</sup>

Nevertheless, the unfolding drama of her, relatively brief, encounter with Heidegger twenty five years after their first liaison, was not without its own significance. The stage was set. Hannah Arendt and her one time teacher and lover Martin Heidegger have not seen each other in more than seventeen years. *She* has never forgotten him; their earliest walks together and conversations about language are still fresh in *his* mind. During the intervening years though, the author of *Being and Time* has publicly *celebrated* 'the greatness, the nobility of [the] national awakening' fostered by Hitler and has played a not insignificant role as a member of the Nazi Party.<sup>475</sup> His erstwhile student meanwhile, is currently in the process of creating a public persona of her own and is establishing a reputation for herself as a political theorist in America. In the first of their two meetings, which took place in February 1950 as a result of Heidegger appearing at her hotel room in Wiesbaden soon after her return there from Basel, Hannah Arendt reported to her husband that 'The two of us had a real talk, I think, for the first time in our lives [...]'.<sup>476</sup> She asked Blücher for his counsel. The following morning she and Heidegger are reunited for a second time, but on this occasion Heidegger's wife is present too. What is described by Arendt as nothing less than a 'fantastic scene'<sup>477</sup> ensues involving an 'aggravating conversation'.<sup>478</sup> The

474 Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondence*, 147.

475 Cited in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 108.

476 Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, *Within Four Walls*, 128–9.

477 In a letter to Hilde Fränkel, 10 February 1950, cited in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 247.

478 Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondence*, 128–9.



atmosphere must have been reminiscent of Strindberg. The gist of what was reported by Arendt during this second meeting is as follows: Heidegger, who she knew to be a ‘notorious liar’ about everything given the chance, had had *every* opportunity during the twenty-five years they had been out of touch to reassure his wife that she, Hannah, had *not* in fact ‘been the passion of his life’.<sup>479</sup> Yet, he had neglected to do so. Nor had he refuted the idea that she had actually been the driving force behind his research. ‘Frau Heidegger’s jealousy,’ we are told, ‘was swift and violent. “She [Arendt],’ came the retort, ‘alas, is simply stupid [*mordsdaemlich*]’”’.<sup>480</sup> Hannah Arendt interpreted the absence of any lies about these matters as confirming the *reverse*, namely that she *had* after all been the passion of Heidegger’s life and that she had *inspired* his work. Which of these two revelations wounded Frau Heidegger more deeply we are left to judge for ourselves. Was it the thought that her husband had in fact been passionately obsessed with Arendt all along, rather than with her; or, was it that she had apparently been his muse? The answer to these questions we can only guess at. What we learn from Arendt, however, is that Frau Heidegger’s anti-Semitism was exacerbated by her, Arendt’s, appearance and that she was, according to the latter, ‘absolutely horrendous’, made Heidegger’s ‘life a hell on earth’ and would probably have been ‘prepared to drown any Jew in sight’ while Arendt was alive.<sup>481</sup>

What is to be made of these high expressed emotions? Is there anything more to this than a storm in a teacup, a tale of entangled passions and jealousies? In a somewhat unforgiving paper, Ernest Gellner, described the reporting of these events as just ‘a tiny bit disingenuous’ in that Hannah Arendt’s descriptions were in fact written ‘to a

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479 Ibid.

480 In a letter to Hilde Fränkel, 10 February 1950, cited in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 247.

481 Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondence*, 128–9.

third party – *not* even to Heidegger himself.<sup>482</sup> ‘How trustworthy’, he asked, ‘is a woman’s uncorroborated claim that a man told her [or did not refute] that she was the passion and inspiration of his life?’ Notwithstanding the truth of a claim is it not ‘a biographer’s duty’, Gellner’s forensic analysis continues, ‘to make plain the unsymmetrical nature of the evidence, and to distinguish between an *ex parte* claim and an established fact’.<sup>483</sup> In a court of law, such interrogation of the facts would indeed have a place, but one is left thinking that an important point is nevertheless in danger of being missed here; a point which, it appears, does not depend at all upon the veracity of what Heidegger is alleged to have either said or remained silent about. For, quite clearly and irrespective of whether Heidegger ever denied his feelings about Arendt to Elfrieda or used or refrained from using particular words, the point, surely, is that it was Hannah Arendt’s *interpretation* of events that is crucial. For, what is revealed is just how much it meant to her, not simply to have been the object of Heidegger’s desires, but to have been regarded as a *significant intellectual other* by this towering thinker (*Denker*) and poet (*Dichter*); significant, that is, not just because of their friendship, but because her research, too, counted for something in *his* eyes. What greater testimonial could she have had than that of being inspirational to *his* thinking? What greater endorsement could there have been that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* marked her out as a thinker in her own right, a worthy occupant of that space Heidegger had created for thought?<sup>484</sup> Arendt’s past was intellectually as well as emotionally bound up with her present.

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482 Ernest Gellner, ‘From Königsberg to Manhattan’ in *Culture, Identity, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 82.

483 Ibid.

484 In a letter to Heidegger that Arendt wrote on 12 March 1970 she describes his genius in terms of him having ‘created real room for thought’. Ludz, *Letters 1925–1975*, 120.

*The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a book that, as we have seen, takes risks, the most significant of which concerns its very credibility as a contribution to “serious” historical scholarship. Its author herself acknowledged that it was not, in fact, in essence at least, an historical work at all and, certainly, there have been and are many respected historians and scholars who have gone further by disparaging and dismissing its historical explorations and meanderings. Isaiah Berlin, for example, is reported as having claimed, ‘[s]he doesn’t get a single fact about Russia right’.<sup>485</sup> However, as I have suggested, I think the book offers deep historical judgements and certainly there are strong indications that opinion is shifting on this matter. In the introduction to a recent publication, historians suggest that a ‘new perspective on Arendt’ is required, one which ‘shift[s] attention away from Arendt the political philosopher [...] towards Arendt the historical thinker’ and that such a perspective is one they ‘are trying to develop’.<sup>486</sup> In contrast, while some historians are now discovering Arendt for themselves, *The Origins* has achieved relatively little acknowledgement from professional political scientists.<sup>487</sup>

The intimation that this would also be a work of *counter*-history or *genuine* history recalling both Nietzsche and Benjamin, a book that would not easily *fit in* with established categories of scholarship, was already suggested by the author’s determination to explore what she referred to at the very outset as ‘the subterranean stream of Western history’.<sup>488</sup> Her continued confidence in this idea survived revisions

485 See Derwent May, *Hannah Arendt* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), 70.

486 Richard King and Dan Stone (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Enocide* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 1.

487 In a paper entitled ‘Reflections on Totalitarianism Leading to Reflections on Two Ways of Theorising’, by Robert Orr, Arendt barely gets a mention. Orr was, at the time of writing the paper, teaching in the Department of Government at the highly respected London School of Economics and Political Science. See Robert Orr, ‘Reflections on Totalitarianism Leading to Reflections on Two Ways of Theorising’, *Political Studies* XXI (1973): 481–489.

488 Arendt, *OT*, ix.

made to the first edition. For example, in the extended ‘Preface to Part One’ written in July 1967 she wrote:

Moreover, what is true for the history of antisemitism, that it fell into the hands of non-Jewish crackpots and Jewish apologetics, and was carefully avoided by reputable historians, is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for nearly all elements that later crystallized in the novel totalitarian phenomenon; they had hardly been noticed by either learned or public opinion because they belonged to a subterranean stream of European history where, hidden from the light of the public and the attention of enlightened men, they had been able to gather an entirely unexpected virulence.<sup>489</sup>

And again, in the third part of the book, the part which dealt with the gruesome phenomenon of totalitarianism itself, in a chapter entitled, ‘A Classless Society’, Arendt described as a coming together ‘all the subterranean, nonrespectable [sic] elements of European history into one consistent picture’.<sup>490</sup>

As I have already remarked, this continual and consistent reference to ‘subterranean elements’ troubled Arendt’s foes and friends alike. Gellner, for example, in the paper previously cited took issue with her again and could scarcely conceal his astonishment this time (‘What on earth was she up to?’), that she discounted what he and others identified as “mainstream” intellectual antecedents of totalitarian dictatorship that could, fairly straightforwardly, be traced back to both Enlightenment and Romantic thinking. ‘Hannah Arendt’, he remarked, ‘must have been incomparably more familiar with the details of this part of intellectual history than I am. All this being so, why on earth did she go out of her way to try and exonerate

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489 Ibid., 15.

490 Ibid., 333.

European thought in the way that she did?’<sup>491</sup> In a similar fashion, Karl Jaspers wrote the following to her in a letter dated 3 April 1953:

What begins to take shape in your essay [Ideology and Terror] is a sense that there is a mysterious history inherent in a totality of events that is calling completely new forces into existence. These forces are melting down everything that has preceded them and are themselves absolute in nature.<sup>492</sup>

Nevertheless, Jaspers warned:

What has made this type [of rule – totalitarianism] possible? Your book provides a number of important answers to that question. But all of this, the entire insight that emerges from it, is limited [...] you have opened up a line of investigation but not explored the reality of the totalitarian mode to its full extent within the overall human reality. For that is an unattainable goal, indeed, an absurd one. If we do not keep reminding ourselves of these limitations, we’re in danger of falling prey to a new demon of the philosophy of history.<sup>493</sup>

Arendt’s investigation of the ‘full extent’ of what totalitarianism meant in terms of ‘overall human reality’, as Jaspers put, its character as a new form of government totally antithetical to pluralism and political activity, would have to await publication of *The Human Condition*. Her focus, in *The Origins* however, on *subterranean* elements, was designed precisely to avoid falling prey to a new philosophy of history, which would, in her eyes, have made her work derivative in character from Hegel, and given the impression that she was seeking to attempt afresh an absolute *unity* of thought and being, that is, a *complete* knowledge system of natural and historical phenomena. Very much in the style of Walter Benjamin, her friend and a kindred

491 Gellner, ‘From Königsberg to Manhattan’, 108.

492 Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondence*, 208.

493 Ibid., 209.

spirit, she bore into the layers of historical ruin, as he had before her, in order to bring to the surface previously unnoticed events and happenings, *fragments* of genuine historical experience, which conventional scholars would judge diverse and unconnected. Maintaining though, her distance from Benjamin's systematic treatment of historiography in, for example, his 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, she was, nevertheless, able to distil the essence of his message and write with freedom and imagination aimed ultimately at achieving a new 'now of recognizability' (Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit). In her case there was not quite Benjamin's 'lightening flash' of recognition (in her case rather, 'Finally, it dawned on me [...]') nor was there a *dialectical* resolution exactly, bringing past and present to a standstill in a new 'image' (Benjamin's term).<sup>494</sup> In Arendt's case, research for *The Origins* had eventually disclosed not so much an image as 'the novel totalitarian phenomenon', the product of a 'crystallizing catastrophe'.<sup>495</sup>

At least one explanation for *The Origins of Totalitarianism's* failure to achieve recognition from a number of historians and political scientists is that at the heart of the book there are profoundly felt, though unstated, philosophical concerns being addressed, which are not part of the analytical and empirical traditions in historical and political thinking. However, while the focus on subterranean elements in history echoed Hannah Arendt's historiographical method as far back as her dissertation, it is also true that her overriding substantive concern was one that could be traced back to her consideration of Saint Augustine too, and at least one of her targets in developing her argument was, again, her former teacher, Martin Heidegger.

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494 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), xii.

495 Arendt, *OT*, xv.

Arendt has frequently been viewed as basking in Heidegger's "glory", her work interpreted as being dependent upon his. In addition, as suggested earlier, ungenerous critics have condemned her for being his post-war apologist too, seeking, perhaps as a "spin-off", to promote her own thought by means of generating broader acceptance for his. These claims, as I have attempted to argue, are unjustified. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was, in fact, the development of a *critique* of Heidegger's metaphysics that Arendt was already expressing unease with as early as her dissertation, and certainly her growing disagreement with her former teacher was clear in the 1946 paper published in *Partisan Review* entitled, 'What is Existenz Philosophy?'.<sup>496</sup> It is her critique of Heidegger's position that I shall now focus on.

Though stated somewhat esoterically, Arendt's 1946 criticisms penetrated, I think, to the very heart of her former teacher's interpretation of Existenz philosophy and aimed to be damning. However, the consequences of the destructive tendencies she identified as the logical outcome of following the path Heidegger had cleared, and others, Sartre amongst them, would follow and broaden, would only be spelt out in graphic terms with the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The book was an exposé of possibilities, realised in the most violent of terms by National Socialists, amongst others, with which, a type of synergy existed vis-à-vis the analysis of Being and time promulgated by Heidegger. To use the language of Goethe and Benjamin there was something of an elective affinity, I think, between what totalitarianism sought to do on the ground, as it were, and aspects of what Heidegger's philosophy sought to achieve intellectually. We know of the philosopher's anti-Semitism, this is

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496 Arendt, 'What is Existenz Philosophy?', 35–56.

now no longer a secret. For example, in a letter to Victor Schworer written in October 1929 Heidegger stated:

In what follows, I want to make more explicit what I could only indirectly hint at in my recommendation. Nothing less is at stake than our undeferrable facing of the fact that we are confronted by a crucial choice: Either [sic] to infuse, again, our *German* spiritual life with genuine indigenous forces and educators, or to leave it at the mercy, once and for all, of the growing Jewish contamination, both in a larger and in a narrower sense. We can only regain our own path, if we prove capable of helping fresh forces to prosper, without the usual baiting and fruitless controversies.<sup>497</sup>

However, I think that what Arendt tried to demonstrate was that, without ever directly stating his support for Nazi atrocities (his celebration of their coming to power in Germany notwithstanding), Heidegger's project, which aimed at rescuing Being from oblivion, actually afforded a type of *legitimacy* to the National Socialist programme of destruction. How was this so?

The clue to *The Origins'* philosophical significance in this sense is revealed in one of the titles under which it failed ever to appear: *The Three Pillars of Hell*, a title resonant of classical formulation and a further indication of the influence of Nietzsche's tripartite division of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, was rejected by the American publishers who opted instead for *The Origins of Totalitarianism* though when published in England by Secker and Warburg it was as *The Burden of Our Time*, a title, we are told, Arendt did not approve of at all.<sup>498</sup> The three pillars in question were, of course, anti-Semitism, imperialism and racism, areas Arendt was to explore in some depth within the book's three treatises. The force of *The Origins* is not

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<sup>497</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Philosophical and Political Writings*, edited by Manfred Stassen (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), 1. Emphasis in original.

<sup>498</sup> Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 200.



inherent, however, in the density of detail related by a meandering text rich in novel and often provocative counter-historical insights. Rather, what is most jarring is the conclusion that the reader is led to draw, namely, that given the nature of the pillars supporting it, the hell alluded to is rooted firmly within the world of mortal human beings. Evoking Sartre's portrayal in *No Exit* of hell as other people (L'Enfer c'est les autres), which departed from the Christian depiction of hell as an extra-worldly realm spewing fire and brimstone and promising torment without relief to all those deemed to have spent their lives sinning on earth, so too, Arendt's was a vision of evil stripped of this image punishment. (In attempting to reorient thought Arendt had realised that evil, as much as any other concept, of course, was open to re-evaluation.<sup>499</sup>) Except that in contrast to Sartre, whose victims are condemned to their fate once their life on earth has come to an end, Arendt's is a visualization which, as we have seen, is as non-dependent upon death as it is on the requirement for a devilish fallen angel to conduct the grisly proceedings. In fact, hell, as depicted by her, can involve little more than what is achieved by the unthinking bureaucratic functionary, an Adolf Eichmann, going about his everyday job in the office scheduling trains. *The Origins* is therefore, a book which courted the controversy that *The Banality of Evil* actually attracted. It prefigured the latter, published in 1963 as a 'Report' on the Eichmann trial, yet despite provoking criticism did not unleash nearly the same barrage of complaints and disapproval. Yet, its portrayal and assessment of evil, made with similar conviction, differed hardly at all.

What type of hell was it, then, that Arendt was pointing to? The most logical response would surely direct the poser of the question to the unbearable details of the Nazi's

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499 Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, has much of value to say on this.

brutal and sadistic acts of cruelty, humiliation and torture against the men, women and children selected as their victims. It would suggest similar violence and degradation perpetrated upon those unnamed millions slaughtered by Stalin or condemned to suffer in the prisons of the furthest reaches of the Soviet empire, the Gulag. There is no famine when it comes to the record of Man's inhumanity towards his fellow beings. Yet, such an answer would fall short of Arendt's intended message.

Arendt's revised thoughts about hell related to a much bigger picture, the wider context as it were, of Man's activities. It derived from Augustine's concept of evil, which, he in turn derived from Plotinus.<sup>500</sup> According to Augustine, the evil man is the man who lacks harmony and balance.<sup>501</sup> *Homo ordinatissimus*, "the well-ordered man", is the individual who comprehends and accepts his place in the cosmos, and understands 'that the laws determining the motions and actions of the parts [of the universe] are necessarily derived from the law of the encompassing whole'.<sup>502</sup> For Augustine, this order originated, of course, in God, the creator of all that exists, the source of all that is good. This is a portrait of conditional liberty and autonomy. While Man is granted the freedom and responsibility for fashioning, in imitation of God's creation, a world in which he and his fellow men can fulfil their needs for physical, emotional, cultural and intellectual sustenance, for reproduction, security and the exercise of free will, the all-encompassing universe into which he is born without inquiry, and from which his departure, after only a temporary residence that may by his endeavours be postponed but never halted, is beyond his power to change. It followed then, in Augustine, that 'wickedness' was the attempt (which, it was

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500 Charles T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition*, discusses Hannah Arendt's concept of Augustinian evil in terms of privation.

501 Hannah Arendt, *LSA*, 61.

502 Ibid.

believed must fail) ‘to escape the predetermined harmony of the whole’.<sup>503</sup> It characterised the failure of a man to accept, to comply with, the mysterious but stable workings of the universe into which he had been delivered and to live a life in which his own will could operate to effect change for himself while being in harmony with his more permanent surroundings. Wickedness was taken to be the angst of not feeling at home in the world made all the worse because escape from the conditions according to which life on earth had been granted to men was impossible. (Only with Camus would suicide, as a means of escape, be discussed, though ultimately discounted, as a possibility.)

He who has become wicked out of [his own] will and has lost the universe he possessed through obedience to God’s precepts, still remains fitted (ordinatus) [as part into the whole] in such a way that he who did not wish to act lawfully is acted upon by the law.<sup>504</sup>

To comport oneself in such an imbalanced fashion was therefore, according to Saint Augustine, to have become evil or to have become a wicked man.

In contrast, the fanaticism of the Nazi obsession to annihilate European Jewry in its entirety, marked for Hannah Arendt a frightening new departure, a paradigm shift in human conduct, the likes of which had never before in human history been witnessed. It marked a turn from the wickedness of individuals, in Augustinian terms, simply not at home in their world, to the *extremism* of groups of men playing God and seeking to revise the very mechanics of the world around them. Intellectually, this was mirrored in a philosophical *revolution* in the true sense of the word, a return, as it were, to the

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

idea that man could once again adopt the mantle of, in Arendt's description, 'Master of Being'.<sup>505</sup>

In her 1946 paper on 'Existenz Philosophy' she explored the consequences of the 'demolition' undertaken by Kant of the ancient idea, echoed in Hegel, that men could achieve direct and certain knowledge of all that surrounded them, a complete and unadulterated unity of Being and thought. And, as we have seen, Kant shattered the belief in the immediate perception of objects making the conditions of the possibility of knowledge dependent upon the exercise, by human beings, of concepts and categories that would, in fact, reveal only phenomena which were subject, for example, to spatial and temporal relations. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* let fall a bombshell, which exploded the ancient assumption of a 'pre-established coincidence of essence and existence [the idea that] everything thinkable also exists and every existent, because it is knowable, must also be rational'.<sup>506</sup> Man's desire for indubitable knowledge of all that there is, which amounts, no less, to a desire to become God, was suddenly shattered. In the wake of the resulting destruction, Arendt argued that philosophers either attempted to re-establish some sort of identity of Being and thought, here she cited the examples of pragmatism and phenomenology, or they rebelled against any such temptation, though with varying degrees of success, and here she drew attention to the work of Schelling and Kierkegaard.

Heidegger was someone she counted as an example of the former type of philosopher, one whose mission it was to breathe new life into ontology, his philosophy peppered with innovative analysis and unique terminology. Except that in so far as Arendt

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<sup>505</sup> Arendt, 'What is Existenz Philosophy?', 47.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 38.

interpreted him, Heidegger's quest for unity suggested a somewhat disturbing turn. To recall, Arendt criticised Heidegger for having made 'the meaning of Being [...] temporality' and thus, in her estimation, having reduced the meaning of Being to 'nothingness'.<sup>507</sup> What are we to make of this? In relation to the attempt to acquire certain knowledge of the world around us through pure contemplation, Arendt understood Heidegger to be arguing that this, indeed, was not possible. There could be no such knowledge arising out of this type of deliberation: this was, she admitted, 'philosophy revolting against philosophy as pure contemplation' – Platonism.<sup>508</sup> However, what Heidegger's metaphysics was attempting was in effect to bypass not just pure contemplation, but, indeed, any form of reflection that could *moderate* action in order to 'progress immediately to the deed' itself.<sup>509</sup> This was because it was the immediacy of the deed that was now understood as re-establishing the unity of the acting Being with the Being being acted upon. However, if at the core of Being there was Nothing (temporality), then Man was surely, according to Arendt's understanding, at liberty to conduct himself in much the same way as God had in creating the world, the entire universe, which He had achieved by starting out with nothing, save that in contrast to God, who created something, Man had a licence to "create" *Nothing*. '[T]he nihilation of the nothing', was the occasion for action alone, unreflected upon and far beyond the gaze of the spectator (all that 'I propose, [...] is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing', Arendt would, with caution, counsel in later years<sup>510</sup>), aimed at dismantling, at destroying what already existed in a display of new found "Mastery of Being".

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507 Ibid., 46.

508 Ibid., 47.

509 Ibid.

510 Martin Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics?', in Heidegger, *BW*, 107. Arendt, *HC*, 5.

Furthermore, Arendt was critical of Heidegger because she argued, his ‘ontological approach hides a rigid functionalism in which Man appears only as a conglomerate of modes of Being, which is in principle *arbitrary*, since no concept of Man determines the modes of his being’.<sup>511</sup> This criticism reflects, I would argue, Arendt’s rejection of Heidegger’s having grounded spatiality in temporality. Not only was Heidegger’s Dasein a being, as we have seen, that was both *self-ish*, that is, concerned only with itself, and additionally not characterised by ‘spontaneity’ or ‘human dignity’ she stated, but we have no indication even about where the philosopher’s ontological depiction of Dasein originated. Of course, it would be wrong to try and attribute to Arendt in 1946 the sophistication of the ‘proposal’ in relation to thinking about what men do that she expressed fifteen years later in the book entitled, *The Human Condition*. However, there was, in embryo, in the earlier work, I think, a strongly felt unease with her former teacher, much as there had been when she was writing her dissertation, for having missed something fundamental out of his supposedly ‘*fundamental ontology*’.<sup>512</sup> And what he had missed was that in his actions man is capable, as Arendt put it, of ‘intend[ing] more than himself’.<sup>513</sup> Heidegger’s ontology that is, its focus upon various modes of temporality notwithstanding, just did not allow room for what Arendt would subsequently identify as *political* man, which involved at the very least, a type of *being with others* that was conditional upon what she would come to describe as a *public* space devoid of practical-environmental anxieties and burdens. To this extent then, Heidegger’s ontology could only be regarded as ‘provisional’.<sup>514</sup> Dasein, she intimated, was unbalanced, disharmonious, potentially evil; and, Heidegger’s depiction of ‘being-with-one-another’, we ourselves

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511 Ibid., 48, emphasis added.

512 Heidegger, *BT*, 34.

513 Ibid.

514 See footnote 373 above.

might judge, was heavily dependent upon and skewed by an extremely gloomy portrayal of *das Man*. Arendt's perception of political man would constitute a major reorientation of thought and was certainly a rejection of *das Man* as characterised in *Being and Time*. Political man was to be distinguished, 'de-severed' even, we might say using Heideggerian terminology, from both private and social man and on the basis not of competing practical or self-serving endeavours but rather, because of something fundamentally human about his politics and his genuine concern to be with others for reasons other than the environmental-practical projects that Heidegger put at the core of 'being-with-one-another'. In contrast to Dasein, political man would present a more fully *human* voice. He was shown by Arendt to thrive on the company of others in contrast to Dasein who was simply swallowed up by *das Man* from whom he was therefore, continually bidding to extricate himself.

What had changed, with the development of Arendt's concept of evil derived as it was from Augustine, was not its nature, but the manner in which and the extent to which the man without balance was able to exhibit it. Totalitarianism represented something new and extreme in as much as this manifestation of wickedness was charged with bringing about *fundamental* change, nothing less in fact, than *ontological* destruction of the spatiality and plurality essential to the expression of human life on earth. It was a demonstration of hubris, the conceitedness of men determined to tamper with the very ontological conditions of their existence that it was simply not in their gift to meddle with. There was an extreme evil at work here, Arendt believed, but not a radical evil because evil is 'never radical' in the sense of being metaphysically distinct, built into the system, as it were; it can only ever be 'extreme' because the

product of the imperfection of human vanity.<sup>515</sup> (Men can change, for the *worse* as much as for the better; it is within their power to make alterations to the way they are with each other.)

The detail of her own ontological proposal would be set out in *The Human Condition*, a work which was written after *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. At the time of writing the latter though, Arendt's dedication to the fundamental value of plurality was already undeniable. It had informed, for example, her warnings in regard to exclusive Jewish education, her support in the late 1940s for a government of both Jews and Arabs in partnership in a federated Palestine, even the demands she made of Jaspers to be recognised as a Jew when contributing to his learned journal. It was at the heart of the work she had undertaken for the JCRO and the inspiration for the exhausting *Hundsarbeit* to which she subjected herself in the early nineteen fifties. The horror of Auschwitz was that it represented the attempt to erase from the face of the earth an entire people; the horror of Nazism more broadly conceived, and Stalinism too according to Arendt, was that it was spatiality and room for politics as a fundament of human existence that was destroyed. If the *Shoah* was a crime against humanity perpetrated upon the Jewish people, the calamity of totalitarianism was that it constituted a crime against Being perpetrated against 'political' beings. This, the warning about the sheer *anti-political* nature of totalitarianism remains, I think, the most important message of *The Origins*, not just the resolve to make the gruesome and the unimaginable comprehensible.

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515 Hannah Arendt, 'Eichmann Jerusalem' in *Encounter* (January 1964), 56.



## CHAPTER 6

### Space for Freedom and for Gazing: Political Discourse and the Spectator

*So, after all, we have not failed to make use of the spaces,  
these generous spaces, these, our spaces.*

Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>516</sup>

*Dasein's own spatiality is essential to its basic state of Being-  
in-the-world.*

Martin Heidegger<sup>517</sup>

*Of course the third party asks very different questions: for him,  
the lovers seem the most indubitable guarantees of human  
existence in general, although not guarantors of a  
transcendent world.*

Hannah Arendt<sup>518</sup>

When Hannah Arendt observed in a book review published in 1945 that ‘the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar [*sic*] intellectual life in Europe – as death became the fundamental problem after the last war’, she was of course, writing in the shadow of the Nazi atrocities perpetrated against European Jewry.<sup>519</sup> However, by the time she came to publish *The Human Condition* a little over a decade later, one might be forgiven for assuming that her now *ontological* as well as historical analyses in that book were targeted against not just the horrors of totalitarian evil but, additionally, against the nefariousness of mass society, demonstrated only too well a few years later by the events in and around Little Rock, Arkansas. It was in the midst of this mass society that Arendt now resided, a citizen grateful for having been allowed to stay in the United States of America. In *The Human Condition* she

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516 Leishman and Spender, *Duino Elegies*, 75. Emphases in original.

517 Heidegger, *BT*, 148.

518 Arendt, ‘Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, 18.

519 See footnote 15 above.

identified the public realm as a space of sheer appearance, in which the political voice by means of which an individual's presence is noticed and registered, is somehow discharged from having to articulate those economic, social and general welfare vulnerabilities that burden our everyday lives and which we have come to expect our elected representatives to address on our behalves through serious and vigorous *parliamentary* debate. A strict demarcation (de-severance as Heidegger might describe it) of the public, the private and the social spheres was now seen as ontologically guaranteed. And defence of the public realm was Arendt's means of preserving space for the expression of the *individual* 'political' voice exempted from peer pressure to mimic or to echo shared beliefs through displays of partisan attachment, and absolved from having to 'act as though [it] were [the single voice] of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest.'<sup>520</sup> (When Norma Davis' father tried to console his, clearly, disconcerted and perplexed daughter, shunned by her friends for wearing a 'Jewish star', he observed that she could, of course, make life easier for herself by simply not wearing the bracelet to which the star was attached and thus going along with the crowd.<sup>521</sup>) If, however, *The Human Condition* sought to address the erasure of difference typical of mass society, it also reflected, I think, Arendt's ongoing disagreement with Heideggerian ontology, which its author now confronted on its own terms. In this sense the book was a response to Heidegger's portrayal of Dasein's authenticity as rooted in practicality and it was a rejection of the picture painted by Heidegger of 'being-with-one-another' coloured largely by his anxieties over *das Man*. So, in defending public space against what she estimated to be the encroachment of the private/social realms whose activities were, she judged,

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<sup>520</sup> In regard to the concept of the 'individual voice' I will be drawing upon David Owen's paper, 'Cultural Diversity and the Conversation of Justice: Reading Cavell on Political Voice and the Expression of Consent', *Political Theory* 27 (1999): 579–596. The words quoted from Arendt come from *HC*, 39.

<sup>521</sup> See footnote 425 above.

dominating the lives of human beings, Arendt was at once defending, I believe, a concept of spatiality essential to human life on earth that Heidegger as well as liberal-minded theorists of culture, society and politics had failed to notice and, she was defending too, a way of *being with others* in public space that owed more to Aristotelian civic friendship than to either the interrogation of Being or the solution of practical problems.

At its most fundamental level the Arendtian public realm, for all the bigotry, inequality and neglect in society to which it demonstrates unconcern and for which Arendt has been subjected to biting criticism is, nevertheless, portrayed as an invisible, in the sense of an insubstantial dimension, a place without location, as it were, rather than an actual physical 'locale'.<sup>522</sup> All the same, it surely depends, I will argue, upon certain material, and not just constitutional, conditions being met. Were this not the case then 'the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives', which Arendt believed, *constituted* freedom would hardly be sufficient to *preserve* it. The fact that human consciousness might somehow be purer, unadulterated, more independent and uncorrupted by pressures to conform, typically present in social settings would surely be insufficient to secure it in the absence of substantial guarantees.<sup>523</sup>

Published in 1958, *The Human Condition* was the book in which Hannah Arendt drew a number of important distinctions between, for example, what she called 'the modern

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<sup>522</sup> For a discussion of the concept of 'locale' see Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 118–122.

<sup>523</sup> Collingwood describes 'the corruption of consciousness' as 'the worst disease of the mind'. See R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 336. The words quoted from Arendt come from *HC*, 57. A little earlier in this book, Arendt also writes about 'conformism inherent in every society'. *Ibid.*, 39.

age' and 'the modern world', and between what she regarded as fundamentally different modes of human conduct, namely labour, work and action. In respect of the distinctions she drew between the public, the private and the social realms, she warned of the dangers the latter posed by encroaching more and more upon the public realm. This led her into some particularly tricky territory, I am thinking here of her 'Reflections on Little Rock'. However, I believe that there is not just a logic to what she had to say but that her judgement was also morally sound.<sup>524</sup> Before I come to this though, I want first to establish that for Hannah Arendt making distinctions was synonymous with understanding, and then I want to go on to chart the very rigid ontological boundaries she believed she had discovered, which separate the private from the public realms and the social from both.

There is a very literal sense in which boundaries are highly significant to Judaism. For example, the *mehitzah* or barrier serves an extremely symbolic role, dating back to biblical times, in separating men and women in the synagogue. The origins of this, the Talmud tells us, can be traced to the festivities of Simchat bet HaShoeva at the end of the festival of Sukkot. Such was the exuberance of the rejoicing between the men and women who mingled together on this happy occasion that the authorities eventually erected a balcony along the perimeter of the Ezrat Nashim (the open area on the Temple Mount) from which the women could view the dancing and high-spiritedness below from a safe and secure place. Today, Norma Baumel Joseph (1992) explains, the *mehitzah* is a physical symbol that distinguishes the interior of Orthodox synagogues, which retain them, from the interiors of non-Orthodox ones, which do not. They are still regarded she notes, as 'provid[ing] the best defense against

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524 Arendt, 'Reflections on Little Rock', *PHA*, 231–246.

mingling and frivolous behavior'.<sup>525</sup> An 'eruv' meanwhile, is another type of boundary, this time a boundary outside of the synagogue in the street. Acknowledged in Jewish law, it marks an area within which certain activities like 'carrying and pushing wheelchairs, prams and baby buggies', even carrying reading glasses or house keys, otherwise prohibited on the Jewish sabbath, are permissible.<sup>526</sup> The 'eruv' can be identified by poles 'joined by invisible wire' over roads or junctions but for the most part existing physical features, walls, hedgerows and so forth are used to specify the perimeters, which, from time to time are subject to repositioning. Since we have already established however, that Hannah Arendt was not brought up in a particularly observant Jewish household, and that Jewish ritual or attendance of synagogue services were of little importance in her life, we might well be dubious about the extent to which it was Judaism that was at the root of her penchant for making distinctions and establishing boundaries.

What we do know however, is that she regarded as central to thinking "proper", as it were, and to understanding, the making of distinctions that, all importantly, would *remain* distinctions in perpetuity, that is, distinctions that would persist without resolution. Thinking, she believed, should articulate multiplicity, it should bring into relief alterity and irreducible plurality as opposed to seeking a terminus in unity through the pursuit of absolute knowledge or higher truth, something which Hegel, in contrast, thought was the outcome of sublation and dialectic. In her essay 'What is Authority?' Arendt stated her case thus:

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525 Norma Baumel Joseph, 'Mehitza: Halakhic Decisions and Political Consequences', in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, edited by Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 19.

526 See, for example, *NW London Eruv* [website] available at <http://www.nwlondoneruv.org/what.shtml> (Accessed 9 January 2010).

It is obvious that these reflections and descriptions are based on the conviction of the importance of making distinctions. To stress such a conviction seems to be a gratuitous truism in view of the fact that, at least as far as I know, nobody has yet openly stated that distinctions are nonsense.<sup>527</sup>

Rilke, as we have seen, cautioned against making ‘too sharp distinctions’.<sup>528</sup>

Nevertheless, it was clear that Arendt perceived a problem in American thinking in the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties, almost a type of intellectual indolence, as a result of which simplicity was being allowed to trump complexity and language, as a result, was being corrupted because of the disappearance of distinctions. There was, she suggested, ‘a silent agreement in most discussions amongst political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions and proceed on the assumption that everything can eventually be called anything else and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right “to define his terms”’.<sup>529</sup> Her very identification of totalitarianism as a unique form of government, for instance, was an example of her fundamental disagreement with those in the political and social sciences who, she argued, would see in Nazism and Stalinism *simply* transformations of the already recognised type of government we describe as tyrannical.

To be clear about this, Arendt was making a point here that will become crucial to my discussion as it develops below. She was highlighting what was essentially a lack of insight in relation to drawing distinctions that she accused contemporary academics of when it came to matters political. For her, as we shall see, it was the *public intellectual* as I am labelling him or her, who, as occupant of the public space and not

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527 Arendt, *BPF*, 95.

528 See page 146 and footnote 360 above.

529 Ibid.

simply a wanderer in the groves of academe, was more likely to recognise distinctions and make the unlikely connections needed to understand contemporary experience.

A key distinction Arendt drew that I now want to focus on in particular concerns that between the public and what she labels, in *The Human Condition*, the ‘social’ realms. She associated the appearance of the latter with the advent of the ‘modern age’, itself distinct from the more recent emergence of the ‘modern world’, which ‘was born with the first atomic explosions’.<sup>530</sup> By the modern age Arendt was referring to such events as ‘the discovery of America [...]; the Reformation [...]; [and] the invention of the telescope’.<sup>531</sup> I am not going to focus on her historical account of the links between developments she attributed to the modern age and the rise of the social realm, though. Rather I want to concentrate here on the actual constitution of this realm or ‘sphere’ as she referred to it within the overall structure of the ‘*vita activa*’, and its relationship to both the private and public realms.<sup>532</sup>

At the outset of *The Human Condition* Arendt identified a number of distinct subdivisions within the *vita activa*. In the first place, the overarching distinction was between the private and the public realms. The former she associated with labouring; the latter with work and what she labelled, ‘action’. By labour, work and action, Arendt wanted us to understand three basic human activities or modes of experience, we might say, each of which required its own “space” in order to take place. ‘Labor’, she wrote (and I will quote at length),

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<sup>530</sup> Arendt, *HC*, 6.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>532</sup> Arendt distinguished, again, between the *vita activa* about which she wrote in *The Human Condition* and the *vita contemplativa* about which she wrote separately. These are, of course, Augustinian terms. With respect to the latter see, *The Life of the Mind*, edited by Mary McCarthy (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978).

is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself.

In contrast,

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness.

Finally,

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.<sup>533</sup>

Labour, work and action are real aspects of human existence on earth. That is, they are dimensions or modes of conduct demanded by the fact of being human. We can see here her determination to add more colour, greater depth, to her consideration of the range of human activities than she judged Heidegger had achieved with his portrayal of Dasein or his analysis of 'being-with-one-another'. Labour is a necessity if one is to physically survive on earth and is concerned with consumption and with birth and death. It is a private activity according to Arendt, and because its products are consumed it leaves no trace of them behind it. Work is similarly necessary in order to provide shelter for men and women to both live in and work in. It does bring men into contact with each other and its products remain after its conclusion in a state of semi permanence. Action is a less easily defined activity. It can involve actors

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533 Ibid., 7.



taking part in politically motivated events, protests and demonstrations, for example, revolutionary upheavals or resistance against an enemy. It always involves others and cannot be conducted in private. It does *not* involve material ‘things’, however, so it is non-practical in nature, not focused on measurable and manageable or realistic tasks. It is never possible to predict just where the results of action will lead, what consequences they will have or how they can be assessed. Once again, in contrast to Kant (in the *CPR*), who, as I have already discussed wrote about concepts and categories in terms of being transcendental conditions of the possibility of knowledge and experience for any rational creature, in the case of labour, work and action these are *real* activities associated with existing human beings; they are not transcendental, although Arendt believed that in any human community one would expect to see evidence of them.

In her later writings though, for example, the lectures she delivered and published on Kant’s political philosophy, it is clear that Arendt intended us to understand by political “engagement” (to my knowledge, this was not an expression she was apt to employ) not just the activities of student protestors or revolutionaries. It was not, in fact, men of action at all, but those onlookers who could *judge* action from a *safe* distance, from the critical distance that is essential for illuminating the meaning of political events, who now became important to her. This seemed to indicate the return of the ‘third party’, newly kitted out in political garb, who had first made his appearance in her commentary on Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* four decades earlier.<sup>534</sup> It was not so much that thought now represented something superior to action in Arendt’s mind as the idea that action without thought was recognised to be directionless (in

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534 See page 148 above.

Kantian terms, *blind*). While actors, like Rilke's lovers, indicate human life, it was the *gaze* of the subject, the spectator (again she was indebted to Kant in this respect), that she came to see as indispensable for disclosing, for *unconcealing* *pace* Heidegger, the meaning of experience. It was the spectator, we might describe him or her in more familiar terms as the public intellectual who, from the understanding distance of a unique perspective, was understood to bring clarity of thought to bear upon the actions of those who, because of their involvement in events, could be expected to relate no more to us than simply an account of their actual experiences.<sup>535</sup>

However, although it may be hard to conceive of a community in which at least labour and work are not in evidence (the absence of action may be a different proposition) Arendt argued that it was possible for the relationships between the spheres in which these activities take place to alter. That was so because of the fact that she did not think there was any predetermined pecking order associated with them or any natural congruity. Thus, in addition to establishing the structure of the human condition, she was keen both in the book of that title and in her subsequent writings to chart the shifting boundaries of the private and the public spheres in relation to each other and in particular to warn of the threats to both posed by the appearance and insatiable appetite of (mass) society.

'The emergence of society', Arendt stated, which amounted to 'the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems and organizational devices' marked a transition 'from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, [which] not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, [but] also

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<sup>535</sup> See footnote 56 above.

changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and citizen'.<sup>536</sup> The problem here, it seems, was one of *metabasis*. In her paper on 'The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question' Arendt had observed that 'the truths of history are accidental, the truths of reason are necessary, and accident is separated from necessity by a "nasty wide ditch", which to leap across would require a "μεταβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος" [a transgression to another field]'.<sup>537</sup> The logical error involved in such a leap, which protects one sphere or field from a foreign or unrelated one is, it would appear, precisely what Arendt was getting at in relation to the 'rise of the social' to use the title of one of her chapters in *The Human Condition*. The activities of the private sphere she seemed to be arguing, are *essentially* distinct from those of the public and to bridge the enormous divide separating them would require a logical error of the proportions of a *metabasis eis allo genos*. Such an "error" was represented in her view by the emergence of society. '[...] each time we leave the protective four walls of our private homes and cross over the threshold into the public world, we enter first, not the political realm of equality, but the social sphere', she wrote.<sup>538</sup> Society then, was seen by her as sitting in the cavity between the private and the public spheres, exposing and elevating to the level of public display what would normally be the hidden activities and preoccupations of the household. It is not proper for this to happen though, according to Arendt, because the life processes, which form part of the realm of necessity, ought, in her judgement, to remain unseen.

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536 Ibid., 38.

537 Arendt, *TJW*, 4.

538 Arendt, *PHA*, 237.

What precisely did Arendt mean by this? What did she mean by life processes? And why did she judge it important that they stay hidden from public view? The concept of ‘living space’ or *Lebensraum* may help to answer these questions, though it is not my intention to draw any parallels between this concept and the myth of *Lebensraum* that inspired Nazi Germany’s military campaign against Soviet Russia in 1941.<sup>539</sup> In terms of what Arendt says about the expansion of the social realm it is clear that this could be described as a type of expansion of ‘living space’ in the sense that she wrote about the development of the social, as we have seen, as a ‘rise [in] housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organizational devices’. Furthermore, the development was, she implied, quite aggressive. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, for example, has gone so far as to describe Arendt’s analysis as being about an ‘attack’, an ‘attack of the blob’ as she labels it. She observes:

In *The Human Condition*, society is variously said to “absorb,” “embrace,” and “devour” people or other entities; to “emerge,” “rise,” “grow,” and “let loose” growth; to “enter,” “intrude” on, and “conquer” realms or spheres; to “constitute” and “control,” “transform” and “pervert”; to “impose” rules on people, “demand” certain conduct from them, “exclude” or “refuse to admit” other conduct or people; and to “try to cheat” people. The social, then, is very lively indeed.<sup>540</sup>

What precisely is it though, that an increase in living space, or *Lebensraum*, in this context could be expected to achieve? Precisely what did Arendt mean to imply was being devoured or conquered or absorbed by *society*? After all, when we allude to the public realm or to the social realm we are not talking about actual physically bounded

<sup>539</sup> See Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: Pan Books, 2001). Burleigh’s is both an informed and elegantly written account of Nazi Germany’s war against the Soviet Union. See also, Kenneth R Olwig, ‘The Duplicity of Space: Germanic “Raum” and Swedish “Rum” in English Language Geographical Discourse’, in *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 84 (2002), for a discussion of *Lebensraum*.

<sup>540</sup> Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 22.

spaces, or to put it another way, identifiable *places*. Even if we have in mind particular individual examples, a parliamentary building, for instance, where legislation is debated and enacted (though Arendt, as we shall see, would not have agreed that even this constituted a public space), or a pub where we regularly meet our friends and colleagues to relax, neither of these exhausts all possibilities nor could either be taken to constitute what the public realm or the social realm as such refer to. In what sense then does someone leaving the private sphere in order to ‘cross over’ into the public sphere enter the social sphere first?

The answer to the question concerns, I believe, the logical geography of concepts according to which we navigate our way around the world. Linked to this is the extent of our conceptual consciousness of the importance and value attaching to certain types of activity. What Arendt was arguing was that, with the decline in experience since the beginning of the modern age, there had been a concomitant loss of *consciousness* as well, apparent not purely in the way the meaning of certain words has become totally unfamiliar to us, but due too, to a depletion in the activities from which they, the experiences and the words, derive. This was why, as we have already seen, she proposed, in *The Human Condition*, ‘nothing more than to think what we are doing’ and this was also why she was fond of using such expressions as ‘without even realising’ and ‘as long as one remains aware that’.<sup>541</sup> Her judgement in regard to the rise of the social was that we have become preoccupied with, *absorbed* and *transformed* by, even *perverted* by activities that may well be worthwhile but not to the extent of deserving *public* prominence, a prominence, that is, which may either

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541 ‘The disappearance of prejudices simply means that we have lost the answers on which we ordinarily rely without even realizing they were originally answers to questions’, in ‘The Crisis in Education’, *BPF*, 171. And, ‘[a]ll is well as long as one remains aware that these usages, legitimate or not, do not constitute the proper intercourse with art’, in ‘The Crisis in Culture’, *BPF*, 200.

mask an activity's real value or simply *distract* our conscious awareness of other activities. It is worth noting that Theodor Adorno wrote: 'Distraction which engenders fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, has its "non-productive" correlate in entertainment; that is, relaxation which does not involve the effort of concentration at all.'<sup>542</sup>

In her essay entitled 'The Crisis in Culture' Arendt observed:

The trouble with the educated philistine was not that he read the classics but that he did so prompted by the ulterior motive of self-perfection, remaining *quite unaware* of the fact that Shakespeare or Plato might have to tell him more important things than how to educate himself; the trouble was that he fled into a region of "pure poetry" in order to keep reality out of his life – for instance, such "prosaic" things as a potato famine – or to look at it through a veil of "sweetness and light".<sup>543</sup>

The argument then, was that, while one's knowledge of Shakespeare and of Plato may well contribute to one's "self-improvement", the belief that that is all that Shakespeare and Plato are good for and the lack of insight that *The Tempest* or *The Republic* have anything in addition to impart about the nature of the world and man's place within it, was troubling. There are echoes here of Arendt's criticism of those nineteenth century Jews who had been so dazzled by the possibilities offered by *Bildung*, ('self-improvement', 'formation') that they embraced it, as Mosse observes, as a *Weltanschauung*.<sup>544</sup> As we have seen, in the process, Arendt remarked, they forgot who they were as Jews and where they had come from in terms of Jewish history.

They too had experienced, in a sense, a loss of consciousness. In her essay on culture,

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<sup>542</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Popular Music', in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 1, IX (1941): 37–38; Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1999).

<sup>543</sup> Arendt, *BPF*, 200, emphasis added.

<sup>544</sup> See, Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism*.

Arendt went on to observe however, that what was just as disturbing was that in mass society, in particular, cultural artefacts were no longer appreciated for their cultural value in relation to what they disclosed about reality, but they had become no better than wares to be consumed, offered by the entertainment industry for our enjoyment in addition, in certain instances, to our edification.

It may be valuable, I think, again to note briefly what Adorno had to say in regard to culture. In pieces ranging from ‘On Popular Music’ published in 1941 to *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1947) co-authored with Max Horkheimer, and the 1963 lecture entitled, ‘Culture Industry Reconsidered’, Adorno consistently expressed anti-bourgeois criticisms of what he considered to have become nothing less than our contemporary ‘culture industry’.<sup>545</sup> And one of this central criticisms concerned ‘the stunting of the mass-media consumer’s powers of imagination and spontaneity’, for example.<sup>546</sup> His analysis had an economic underpinning, the critique of capitalism, that was absent in Arendt. So, whereas she all but blamed individuals for *allowing* themselves to be deceived into thinking that trashy imitations of cultural treasures could actually be edifying, he blamed matters on a conspiracy generated within the ‘culture industry’ itself in respect of which the individual was almost helpless. This was a conspiracy aimed at automating and standardising not just cultural products, ‘a Beethoven symphony [...] crudely “adapted” for a film sound-track [or] a Tolstoy novel [...] garbled in a film strip’, but the *consumer* of those products too.<sup>547</sup> ‘[...] sustained thought’ on the part of ‘the spectator’, for example, was ‘out of the

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<sup>545</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Culture Industry Reconsidered’, translated by Anson G. Rabinbach, *New German Critique* 6 (1975), 12–19.

<sup>546</sup> Adorno, *Dialectic*, 126.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

question. [...] no scope [was] left for the imagination'.<sup>548</sup> Their differences apart, one can see here, I think, worries that Arendt and Adorno shared in common with respect to the way in which American mass culture was perceived as administering analgesics that only served to anaesthetise the spectator, deadening his or her senses rather than stimulating them, and making that spectator far less perceptive to what was going on around him or her in the process. In terms of the importance Arendt attached to the role of the *political* spectator the implications of this loss of consciousness were extremely significant.

Arendt's critique of culture was not aimed at desecrating entertainment *per se*. She believed, quite the contrary, 'that we all stand in need of entertainment', that it is highly important, providing much needed relief from the intense stresses and strains of public life.<sup>549</sup> However, 'entertainment, like labor and sleep is irrevocably part of the biological life process'.<sup>550</sup> The problem for her was therefore, that 'biological life is always, whether laboring or at rest, whether engaged in consumption or in the *passive reception* of amusement, a metabolism feeding on things by devouring them'.<sup>551</sup> And here we get to the essence of Arendt's concerns relating to what has become of culture, namely that in being exposed to classic works of art and literature, which are being relentlessly adapted for our amusement, passivity blocks our becoming conscious of their real message. Such adaptations, which strive, for example, to make '*Hamlet* [...] as entertaining as *My Fair Lady*' neither leave behind them what we have come to expect from the classics, an artificially created world

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548 Ibid., 127.

549 Arendt, *BPF*, 203.

550 Ibid., 202.

551 Ibid., emphasis added.



from which we can take our bearings, nor do they help us understand reality by casting any of their light upon it.<sup>552</sup>

An increase in living space then, was for Arendt akin to an increase in the amount of “room” we take up, we might say mental energy we expend, in order merely to meet life’s basic demands. In other words, it indicated our having become too much concerned or too *taken up with* those purely life affirming activities, broadly understood, to which we are frequently all too ready to submit. We have then, become lost in our conceptual terrain and disorientated. The manner in which we conduct ourselves demonstrates a type of ‘corruption of consciousness’, though not in the sense that R.G. Collingwood intended, which was ‘characterized [...] in terms of dishonourably motivated failures of self knowledge’, but rather, in the sense of a different ethical condition distinguished by a willingness to relinquish all too easily our responsibility for being spectators of world events and for engaging critically *with others* in public.<sup>553</sup> Arendt deemed such behaviour essential to what being human means. That is not to say that she neglected to consider the possibility that the *distractions* of the social sphere lead to the corruption of consciousness in terms of an alignment with what David Owen has described as ‘Emerson’s concept of “conformity”’.<sup>554</sup> Arendt was only too aware that in the social sphere ‘we become subject to the old adage of “like attracts like” which controls the whole realm of society in the innumerable variety of its groups and associations’.<sup>555</sup> However, she was not overly concerned by this because she believed that ‘personal identity has its

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552 Ibid., 204.

553 David Owen, ‘Cultural Diversity and the Conversation of Justice: Reading Cavell on Political Voice and the Expression of Consent’, *Political Theory* 27 (1999) 581. Arendt discusses the importance of the spectator critic in her *Lectures on Kant*, for example. R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*.

554 Owen, ‘Cultural Diversity’, 581.

555 Arendt, *PHA*, 237.

source beyond the social realm', and the means by which groups of people in the social sphere discriminate against each other on the bases 'of profession, income, and ethnic origin', for example, 'is as indispensable a social right as equality is a political right'.<sup>556</sup> If, for Collingwood, 'the community's medicine for the worst disease of the mind, the corruption of consciousness' was art, poetic and artistic expression,<sup>557</sup> which serves to distinguish and *individualize*, for Arendt, in contrast, it was public political engagement with others that was identified as the key to restoring health by bringing people together to articulate their distinct perspectives. What exactly constitutes 'public health', though? It is here that the role of the political spectator comes into its own.

In *On Revolution* Arendt analysed two historical events, namely the French and the American revolutions from the standpoint of what they achieved in political terms.<sup>558</sup> Her evaluation was dependent upon gauging the success or the failure, on the one hand of the Founding Fathers of the American Constitution, and on the other of the revolutionaries who declared the First Republic, in refusing to make social issues their priority. To what extent, Arendt wanted to know, did questions of social hardship and inequality, for example, determine the directions taken by the revolutionaries in each case? In respect of the French, she observed that it was 'not the conspiracy of kings and tyrants but the much more powerful conspiracy of necessity and poverty [that] *distracted* them long enough to miss the "historical moment"'.<sup>559</sup> She was fully aware of the *violence* with which the attempt to satisfy the life process manifested itself, namely, at that very moment during the Revolution, 'when the poor, driven by the

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<sup>556</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>557</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, 336.

<sup>558</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 61, emphasis added.

needs of their bodies, burst onto the scene'.<sup>560</sup> In contrast to the French Revolution however, it was the very absence of a 'social question', as it were, in the American context, that enabled the Founding Fathers to establish a truly public space that would establish and protect freedom, according to Arendt. Of course, this was made easier to the extent, as she herself admitted quoting Jefferson, that in the case of the French Revolution, "'of twenty millions of people ... there are nineteen millions more wretched, more accursed in every circumstance of human existence than the most conspicuously wretched individual of the whole United States'".<sup>561</sup> (This does not seem to take any account though, of the position of the slaves.) The point however, is that in contrast to the American Revolutionary context, in the case of the French Revolution, events were re-routed, as it were, by expressions of compassion due to the fact that the focus of the revolutionaries themselves had been redirected by the ferocious upsurge of necessity, which had caused them to lose sight (consciousness) of the true meaning of freedom. As Arendt put it:

When they [the poor] appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them, and the result was that the power of the old regime became impotent and the new republic was stillborn; freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself.<sup>562</sup>

There remains outstanding, of course, the whole issue of how Arendt thought that the 'social question' could be tackled and this was bound up with what she had to say regarding technology, for example. However, this is not an issue that I will be dealing with here. Rather, my point is to draw attention to the fact that in evaluating the achievements of the American Revolution in contrast to the failings of the French,

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 67. Ellipsis in original.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 60.

Arendt was retrieving from the ruins of history and reaffirming in the process an exemplar of politics that she believed we had lost consciousness of, namely a concept of politics in which administrative, social and welfare concerns, for example, are not the priority of the political actors seeking to found a *political* constitution. And it was this, the ability to employ history to *constitute* and indeed *reconstitute* the reference points from which we can take our moral and political bearings that Arendt associated with the political spectator. His or her significance lay precisely in being able to recognise *exemplars* (Kant), the American Revolution, or National Socialism, and what is more, in identifying such exemplars recognising *in them* something universal, the meaning of politics, or, as in the case of the novel phenomenon of totalitarianism, the very essence of *anti*-politics. Historical exemplars are, in fact, phenomena of origin in that they suggest something hidden to the eye, something ontological. Exemplars could, in Arendt, as in Kant, subsequently be used to derive the universal, the meaning of ‘politics’ in her case, rather than the other way around. This I think was what she intended in relation to totalitarianism and it was what she meant by talking about her realisation that in writing an apparently historical book about it she had in fact hit upon ‘politics’. She had, that is, discovered politics to be an ontological condition of human life on earth.

In her lectures on Kant Arendt observed:

The condition *sine qua non* for the existence of beautiful objects is communicability; the judgement of the spectator creates the space without which no such objects could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers.<sup>563</sup>

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563 Arendt, *LKPP*, 63.

For her, the *sine qua non* of the public realm was about the communication that comes from being in certain relations with others, communication dependent upon the judgements of individuals coming from unique perspectives to “appear” in public and to make their voices heard on political matters. It was such individuals, public intellectuals, rather than professional academics, for example, who Arendt believed occupy the space that drives public debate and ensures the protection of freedom through the recognition and reaffirmation of what politics is all about. Public intellectuals are not unlike sentinels (were it not for the unwanted connotations of Paul Nizan’s Marxist characterisation, we might suggest they are rather like ‘watchdogs’<sup>564</sup>) who continuously patrol our logical geography alert to crimes of trespass, vigilant always for signs of the unauthorised crossing of conceptual boundaries – for example, the harmful because confusing equation of commerce or business with politics. If frontiers have been crossed, because, for instance, their perimeters have become obscured and signposts to forewarn us of their proximity, their exact location even, have been lost amongst the debris of history, then the sentinel is there to make us aware of any *metabasis eis allo genos*, or logical error of leaping from one field to a foreign one and of our having forgotten, for instance, that such distinctions as those between private and public or between forgiveness and judicial pardon do actually exist.<sup>565</sup> This was, I would contend, behind Hannah Arendt’s whole attempt to reorient our thinking, by reclaiming from the ruins of the past broken signposts and battered reference points, that might help us again, when conjoined with our own living experience, to find our way around the world.

564 Paul Nizan, *The Watchdogs: Philosophers and the Established Order* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

565 W. H. Auden was one of the very few people who pointed out to Arendt a distinction, the veracity of which she accepted, namely the distinction between judicial pardon and forgiveness that she had failed to acknowledge in *The Human Condition*. Arendt accepted that such a distinction indeed existed and that she had missed it and was thereafter grateful to Auden for having illuminated it for her. A digitised version of her letter to Auden, dated February 14, 1960 can be accessed from the online archives of her correspondence at: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendhtml/series.html> (Accessed 12 April 2008).

The extract from Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* that I have just quoted from above suggests something else too, however, something which should, I would argue, remind us of Aristotle. We know from Kant's essay 'What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' that he judged that thought itself depended upon communication. To recall the first epigraph to chapter three of this thesis, 'how correctly would we *think*', he asked, 'if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we *communicate* our thoughts and who communicate theirs with us!'<sup>566</sup> Communication then, played a crucial function in Kant's critical philosophy and it was a function that I think was at the heart of Arendt's work, too. Her public realm is a space, however intangible, where public intellectuals, the guardians of the conceptual landscape come together precisely to gaze, to communicate and thus, to think – to gaze upon particular events, daily happenings and occurrences on the world stage, and to articulate judgements that offer understanding. Peg Birmingham has helpfully noted:

the spectator, whose vision is neither contemplative nor introspective, looks at the singular and contingent. This vision does not gaze up to the eternal or necessary forms; rather, it looks out to those events through which thinking is given something to think and, moreover, to critically change its ways of seeing.<sup>567</sup>

Hannah Arendt's public intellectual is neither in quest of Platonic Truth, nor for that matter is he or she self-obsessed, nor does he or she yearn to belong to some sort of self-congratulatory honour society. Arendtian public space is, in Heideggerian language, where human beings can be with each other, not in a condition of

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<sup>566</sup> Kant, *RRT*, 16. See footnote 203 above.

<sup>567</sup> Peg Birmingham, 'Hannah Arendt: The Spectator's Vision', in Hermesen, Joke J. and Villa, Dana R. (eds.), *The Judge and the Spectator: Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 39.

*averageness*, but rather in conditions of equality and plurality where each is given equal voice and equal respect. Each expresses their own ideas and are receptive to those of others, fellow “occupants” of this “place”, to whom they in turn listen. And this stimulates thinking some more, intelligibility and ultimately understanding. What this suggests is that, first, the public realm functions, in part, as a repository of collective memory. In terms of a community it serves as a ‘yardstick’, that is, similar to the one that Hannah Arendt referred to in relation to individual memory in her doctoral dissertation. It enables time to be measured, because each of the occupants of the public realm, wearing his or her sentinel’s hat, brings to this space their own fragments of genuine historical experience that they have salvaged during their particular excavations into the wreckage of the past.<sup>568</sup> To recall, once again, ‘[...] every new human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it [that ‘small non-time space in the very heart of time’] anew’, she remarked.<sup>569</sup>

In addition to serving as a repository of collective memory though, a storehouse from which the remnants that have been salvaged from the past can help guide us in the present and towards the future, the public sphere also serves to generate, I think, a form of Aristotelian civic friendship. In *The Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle observed of the happy man:

Surely it is strange, too, to make the supremely happy man a solitary; for no one would choose the whole world on condition of being alone, since man is a political creature and one whose nature is to live with others. [...] even the happy man lives with others; [...] the happy man needs friends.<sup>570</sup>

568 See pages 29–30 above.

569 Arendt, Preface to *BPF*, 13.

570 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 238–9.

Arendt's public intellectual, it seems to me, is someone who relishes concord with his and her fellows within the public realm precisely because he or she experiences a form of happiness, 'public happiness', denied those who live in the isolation and solitude of mass society. Public happiness was something Heidegger simply could not identify with the public sphere of *das Man*. In *The Origins*, Arendt established how totalitarian governments eradicate all sense of individuality and community destroying the space between those imprisoned within their concentration camps and Gulags. In 'mass culture' too though, she identified 'deep-rooted trouble [in the form of] a universal unhappiness'.

The happiness achieved in isolation from the world and enjoyed within the confines of one's own private existence can never be anything but the famous "absence of pain," a definition on which all variations of consistent sensualism must agree.<sup>571</sup>

It is a feature, I think, of the activity of the public intellectual within the public realm that he or she demonstrates a bond of *civic friendship* (Arendt refers at times to 'sociability') with his or her fellows in what Arendt describes in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* as a *sensus communis*.<sup>572</sup> Following Aristotle's discussion in Books VIII and IX of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, living in isolation, it seems, can only lead an individual to become less rather than more continuously active at the things they most care about. On the other hand, where one is "engaged" with *others* in the pursuit of one's interests, then one is likely to be more continuously active. However, we should be aware that being engaged with others does not mean simply being in their company, being that is, in close proximity and yet diverted still by one's

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<sup>571</sup> Arendt, *HC*, 134 and 112.

<sup>572</sup> Arendt, *LKPP*, 72. Arendt refers to 'sociability' also in *LKPP*, 73.



own private pursuits. It suggests instead, as John Cooper has perceptively acknowledged, ‘making one’s fundamental life activities themselves activities shared in common with others’.<sup>573</sup> Politics, may be an occasion for discrimination, but it is additionally an occasion for the pleasure of sharing and one of the chief features of the public realm is the desire to share ones opinions and listen to those expressed by others.<sup>574</sup> This, I would argue, was something absent from Heidegger’s vision.

We have noted already Habermas’ consternation in regard to Arendt’s separating off from politics what are taken by many to be legitimate, indeed intrinsic, facets of political discussion:

a state which is relieved of the administrative processing of social problems; a politics which is cleansed of socio-economic issues; an institutionalization of public liberty which is independent of the organization of public wealth; a radical democracy which inhibits its liberating efficacy at the boundaries where political oppression ceases and social repression begins – this path is unimaginable for any modern society.<sup>575</sup>

What I want to do in this final section of the chapter is address the issue from an alternative perspective though, from the direction, that is, of the public realm infringing upon what Arendt viewed as rightly the preserve of the adjacent social sphere. Doing this will, I hope, help us to make sense of both her political judgement and her role as a public intellectual; it will also force us to consider how the public realm, intangible though it is, is surely dependent upon certain material conditions being met if it is to endure.

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<sup>573</sup> John M Cooper, ‘Aristotle on Friendship’, in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 324.

<sup>574</sup> See above, 21.

<sup>575</sup> See pages 112–113, footnote 274 above.

For all of her criticisms, Arendt was not totally dismissive of the social sphere. What she did criticise was its gobbling up of more and more areas of public life implying that we think more and more in terms of such life-affirming concepts as say, our economic well-being and our personal development. The social realm, she thought, had ‘transformed all modern communities into societies of laborers and jobholders; in other words they [have become] centred around the one activity necessary to sustain life’.<sup>576</sup> However, she also thought that the social sphere played an “acceptable” role if that is not to put it too strongly, one that I have already intimated by describing it in terms of its capacity for discrimination, and she paid it a type of backhanded compliment by painting it in a favourable light, particularly in relation to mass society, which she described as attempting to level out all differences between people. So far as I can tell, Arendt was not averse to all demonstrations of social discrimination, so long as they were confined to situations in which people only ‘congregate for the purpose of associating with each other’ by which she meant, purely doing no more than spending time in each other’s company in, for example, holiday resorts or, we might infer, private clubs and institutions.<sup>577</sup> Discrimination was another matter though, when it came to being discouraged or prevented from using ‘services which, whether privately or publicly owned, are in fact public services that everyone needs in order to pursue his business and lead his life’.<sup>578</sup> In these situations, discrimination simply could not be tolerated and laws making it illegal had to be enforced. However, in September of 1957, there erupted what became known as the ‘Battle of Little Rock’, which revolved around Central High School in Arkansas. It dropped something of a bombshell into the conceptual terrain causing nothing but confusion and disorientation, it seemed.

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<sup>576</sup> Arendt, *HC*, 46.

<sup>577</sup> Arendt, *PHA*, 239.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*

In brief, Central High was a focal point for desegregation in the American South. In the Spring of 1957 the School Board, in compliance with its legal requirements, had stated its intention to rescind the practice of segregation and to implement a policy of full integration for black and white pupils. Plans were put in place to make this a reality (other schools in the South had already started doing this without any problems), by September of the same year. During the summer months a number of black children applied to the school and of these nine were duly selected. In early September, however, Governor Faubus attempted to get legislation passed that would, in fact, reintroduce segregation and, fearing trouble from white supremacists, he called in the National Guard, two hundred and fifty of whom surrounded Central High. Just what their orders were, that is, whether it was the school itself or whether it was the pupils, black and white, who were to be protected by these men, is somewhat unclear. After an additional day of closure (3 September), however, Central High reopened for the new semester. The school superintendent made clear though, that in doing so it was opening its doors to all; there would be no further policy of segregation at the school.

I want, at this point, to jump to the image (literally – it was a photograph) of a young black child that appeared in newspapers across America at that time, one Elizabeth Eckford, who, for Hannah Arendt served to bring all of the events related to the ‘Battle of Little Rock’ into sharp focus.<sup>579</sup> Elizabeth, a fifteen year old, was pictured, as described by Arendt, ‘accompanied by a white friend of her father, [actually, he

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<sup>579</sup> A detailed account of the ‘Battle of Little Rock’ is provided by Danielle Allen in her essay, ‘Law’s necessary forcefulness: Ralph Ellison vs. Hannah Arendt on the Battle of Little Rock’, in *Multiculturalism and Political Theory*, edited by Anthony Simon Laden and David Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 315–349.

was a New York Times reporter by the name of Benjamin Fine, and he was Jewish<sup>580</sup>] walking away from the school persecuted and followed into bodily proximity by a jeering and grimacing mob of youngsters'.<sup>581</sup> In fact, we know that Elizabeth was confronted by a mob that included adults too, that 'when she [...] tried to pass through, [into the school] the soldiers thrust their bayonets at her chest', and that Fine helped her to escape and protected her that day from a mob baying for her to be lynched.<sup>582</sup> At this point, Elizabeth Jacoway reports, the mob actually turned on Fine too, hurling anti-Semitic abuse at him and threatening him with castration if he did not stop interfering.<sup>583</sup>

Two points can be made, I think. The first is that the brutality on show at Little Rock brought into a strange "alliance" two groups, one black one Jewish and demonstrated, according to Elizabeth Jacoway, just how easily a baying mob (even in America) could shift 'from racism to anti-Semitism'. (To recall, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith had release its short film, 'An American Girl, The Problems of Prejudice', only a few years previously.) The other point, and this was what Arendt was indeed trying to emphasise, was that the ordeal that Elizabeth was subjected to was clearly horrific and traumatic and raised the question as to whether this fifteen year old young black woman, should have been put into a situation that would have quite understandably terrified even someone older and more experienced in life than she herself. In other words, was the price of Elizabeth's ordeal an acceptable one to pay in order to force the issue of desegregation?

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580 See Elizabeth Jacoway, 'Turn Away Thy Son', in *The Washington Post* [Online] (16 March 2007), available from, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/style/longterm/books/chap1/turnawaythyson.htm> (Accessed 5 December 2009).

581 Arendt, *PHA*, 236.

582 Allen, 'Law's necessary forcefulness', 321.

583 Jacoway, 'Turn Away Thy Son'.

We can, I believe, speculate with some degree of confidence, that in reflecting upon the issues surrounding Little Rock, Hannah Arendt had been led to recall what she later spoke about in a 1964 television interview regarding her own childhood memories of dealing with anti-Semitic remarks. She told her audience and the interviewer:

You see, all children encountered anti-Semitism. And the souls of many children were poisoned by it. The difference with me lay in the fact that my mother always insisted that I not humble myself. One must defend oneself! When my teachers made anti-Semitic remarks – usually they were not directed at me but at my other classmates, particularly at the Eastern Jewesses – I was instructed to stand up immediately, to leave the class, go home, and leave the rest to school protocol. My mother would write one of her many letters, and, with that, my involvement in the matter ended completely. I had a day off from school, and that was, of course, very nice.<sup>584</sup>

As far as Arendt was concerned, Elizabeth Eckford had been improperly and unjustly placed in the firing line. ‘The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero’ she observed. ‘Have we now come to the point’ she continued by inquiring, ‘where it is the children who are being asked to change or improve the world? And do we intend to have our political battles fought out in school yards?’<sup>585</sup> Arendt, as she made clear in her essay entitled ‘The Crisis in Education’ regarded it as incumbent upon schools to serve as pre-political places of safety. Educational activity’s ‘task is always to cherish and to protect something – the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new’.<sup>586</sup> Clearly for Arendt, this duty of care and

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<sup>584</sup> Young-Breuhl, *Hannah Arendt*, 11–12.

<sup>585</sup> Arendt, *PHA*, 236.

<sup>586</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘The Crisis in Education’, *BPF*, 188.

protection had been waived in the case of Elizabeth Eckford and the other Black children who were eventually admitted to Central High on 24 September following the arrival of federal troops. ‘Sure we’re in Central ... but how did we get in?’, one of the children asked the following day. ‘We got in, finally, because we were protected by paratroops. Some victory!’<sup>587</sup>

For Arendt the entire affair ultimately suggested to her that the essence of public life, its equal treatment of all engaged in what she deemed political activity, was being forced upon those engaged in non-political activities, that is on those engaged in education. Yes, the law, quite rightly she admitted, had been changed to make the heinous practice of segregation illegal. However, to try and force the issue at Central High, to try and force those white children and adults to accept their Black neighbours, who they clearly hated, was an error of judgement. Discrimination, is an intrinsic characteristic of the social realm of which education also forms a part, (Arendt believed all three spheres, the public, the private and the social, in fact, have a vested interest in education<sup>588</sup>) and to this extent if it is to be eliminated it cannot be because the values of the public realm are *imposed* but only by, as we might today describe matters, changing hearts and minds. And this, Arendt believed, was something in which religious institutions should take the lead: ‘The only public force that can fight social prejudice is the churches’, she stated, ‘and they can do so in the name of the uniqueness of the person, for it is on the principle of the uniqueness of souls that religion (and especially the Christian faith) is based’.<sup>589</sup> (In the case of Norma Davis in, ‘An American Girl, The Problems of Prejudice’, it was by speaking

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587 Cited in Allen, ‘Law’s necessary forcefulness’, 321–322. Ellipsis in original.

588 Arendt, *PHA*, 241–242.

589 Ibid., 240.

to her “friends” and their parents in public at a school meeting, and by reading to them from her own private diary, that she hoped to change their attitudes towards the Jews.) There is something odd about Arendt’s understanding of the education system, which she seemed to be bringing under the criterion of mere association simply involving people of like mind (or colour in this instance) choosing to be in each other’s company to the exclusion of those against whom they are prejudiced. She did not view it, that is, in terms of a service ‘that’, as quoted above, ‘everyone needs in order to pursue his business and lead his life’. However, the peculiarity of her interpretation was, I think influenced by the fact that children were involved here and that to force the matter, in line with legal requirements, risked placing them in situations of grave danger and sheer terror, which clearly would be wrong.

The line Arendt took won her ‘the 1959 Longview Foundation award for the year’s outstanding little-magazine article’.<sup>590</sup> However, as Young-Breuhl points out, it also brought her much criticism from the editors of and contributors to such journals as *Commentary* and *Dissent*. In particular, Arendt became involved in a public disagreement over Little Rock with the Black novelist, Ralph Ellison, author of, for example, *Invisible Man*.<sup>591</sup> Ellison took a very different line to Arendt on the matter and did not think that she at all understood either Black history or the situation Blacks at the time found themselves in in the United States of America. Danielle Allen has summarised the dispute well and in my following remarks I shall summarise her essay in an attempt to get to the nub of the dispute.<sup>592</sup>

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590 Young-Breuhl, *Hannah Arendt*, 315.

591 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2001).

592 See Allen, ‘Law’s necessary forcefulness’.

As far as Ellison was concerned, Little Rock was part of a much wider problem, and not just a problem experienced by Blacks in America, which revolved around the support any democratic system depends upon, in effect, the good will it requires from very many of its citizens, because of the inevitable losses they experience as a result of the way in which the outcomes of legislative procedures unfold in real life. Allen describes it thus:

law-making turns about and once again renders some citizens, and their interests, invisible insofar as the legislative bodies produce general rules as the basis for collective action and so explicitly fail to respond to the diversity of citizens' experiences and circumstances. Although laws aim at the common good, they inevitably harm some citizens. Indeed, the legal system is, in an important way, a method of managing the variable distribution of harms and benefits throughout a citizenry.<sup>593</sup>

Invisibility was an important concept in Ellison's writings and it was linked to the idea of sacrifice, to the fact that Black Americans, for example, were subject to laws which often benefited others rather than them, but which, nevertheless, they were expected to accept passively without making a fuss, as it were, for the greater good of the country as a whole. Full and enthusiastic consent within democracy is wishful thinking to say the least (contrary to the projects of some democratic theorists writing since Little Rock<sup>594</sup>) but the sacrifices of the Black community, Ellison believed, and those of many other citizens for that matter, went largely unrecognised and yet the country depended upon these sacrifices being tolerated. Little Rock was an example of law-making intended to benefit the Black population of this Arkansas town, in theory, but which threatened to demand, in practice, just the type of sacrifice he was

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<sup>593</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid., 326.



highlighting. And this, in the context of the struggle for Black Civil Rights was, he judged, a sacrifice too far.

For Allen following Ellison, the whole ‘Battle of Little Rock’ points precisely to the *connection* between the social and the public spheres rather than, as Arendt argued, their perceived separation. That is, Arendt is perceived as having drawn too sharp a distinction. In the context of Ellison’s ‘recuperation’ for political theory of the term ‘sacrifice’, Allen writes, ‘the social is linked to the political not only because it is affected by political actions but because it secures the political realm’.<sup>595</sup> The implementation of laws that will not benefit certain sectors of the citizenry, which may indeed require losses or sacrifices on their part, reflects law’s forcefulness, but it also demonstrates that,

[i]n a law-oriented politics, citizens grant their representatives the power to make decisions that have widely ramifying effects; [...] It is precisely because law’s effects outstrip its intended consequences that our private and social worlds are so thoroughly tied to the political.<sup>596</sup>

In the wake of the ‘Battle of Little Rock’ Hannah Arendt admitted that there were aspects of the whole episode that she had indeed misjudged, the level of violence being one of them. There were other aspects, the details of which are recounted in Allen’s paper, that Arendt simply got wrong. For instance, she took a snipe at the father of Elizabeth Eckford because of his absence on the morning of 3 September when the affray outside Central High took place insinuating that he was not there because he was an uncaring parent. As Allen demonstrates, however, this was unjust.

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<sup>595</sup> Ibid., 340. Allen praises Ellison for recuperating the term ‘sacrifice’ on page 316.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid., 344–345.

The parents of each of the nine Black children at the centre of the episode had, in fact, been asked to stay away from the school by the superintendent in an effort to reduce the potential for violence and much as this went counter to their instincts they complied with the request, though at the cost of enormous personal anguish. However, on the central points Arendt stuck her ground, she never shifted position and the reason why, I believe, has to do precisely with her understanding of the nature of public political engagement and the relationship she saw between the public and the social realms.

We can take as our point of departure the case of Arendt's own life to get a provisional answer to the question about what she understood public political activity to be. As I have already discussed above, Arendt advocated keeping to the margins of society, so we can assume that this was what she believed she herself was doing throughout her life. To recall, 'social nonconformism, is the *sine qua non* of intellectual achievement' she stated.<sup>597</sup> (She might just as easily have stated that it was the *sine qua non* of freedom, too.) However, if we accept that she kept her distance, at least in her estimation, from the lure of the social sphere, it is clearly the case also that the nature of her activity was certainly not confined to the private realm – that would obviously be a nonsensical claim. So, what are we left with? Presumably, Arendt herself must have believed that she moved in the public realm and was engaged in public *political* activity. What are we to make of this, though? Since she was not affiliated to a political party, nor actively working on behalf of one, or for that matter engaged in local or city politics or protests, in precisely what did her public political engagement consist? In answer to this question I would argue that it consisted in exactly that for

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597 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, xv.

which we know her best: her writings on political, philosophical and historical themes; her willingness to raise her head above the parapet in order to comment, in open public debate, on what were frequently, controversial subjects, for example, the Eichmann trial and Little Rock, about which the majority of us would probably prefer to keep, at least a low *public* profile; and, it consisted in re-thinking the cultural, moral, philosophical and political, reference points we constantly use to navigate our way around reality, reference points which she believed had become obscured and which needed to be retrieved from the detritus of history and connected to contemporary experience in order that we might build a new conceptual framework. This, for Arendt was what occupying public space demanded. It was ‘public spiritedness’ of the highest order within a *sensus communis* demonstrated by someone conscious of the need to combat the dangers of ideological thinking and social conformity in mass society.

Where Arendt’s detractors misunderstand her and become confused is in attributing to her a sense of politics that conforms to conventional standards and expectations. Danielle Allen is guilty of this, for example, when, in the course of her critique of Arendt, she casually slips into her analysis, as we have seen, a conception of politics as ‘law-oriented’ to which she seems to think Arendt would have ascribed. And on these grounds, of course, it would be possible to totally undermine Arendt by pointing to “‘the thick” context of interpersonal relations, habits and customs that determine the meanings and associated expectations of formal rules’.<sup>598</sup> On this basis, the political realm would indeed be dependent upon the frequently unacknowledged sacrifices of those in society whom the law simply does not benefit. However, it is

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<sup>598</sup> Allen, ‘Law’s necessary forcefulness’, 339–340.

clear that Arendt did not equate politics with law-making. The ‘triangular borderland of scholarship, journalism, and public debate’, which Bernard Wasserstein has recently described to criticise Arendt’s public activity, actually depicts fairly well, I would argue, the type of public realm cum *sensus communis* divorced from the law that she wrote about and promoted.<sup>599</sup> Allen actually remarks at one point that Arendt believed that in the ancient world it was precisely because laws were taken as being *made* that law-making was not categorised as a political activity. Certainly Arendt’s own conception of politics was not one which equated it with the legislative functions of representative government. While she made much of the political importance of *founding*, for example, the founding of Rome or of the American Constitution, clearly, she believed law-making itself and the whole framework of statutory law, which exists to promote and to protect private interests and welfare and secure private happiness is, though a crucial aspect of government, nevertheless an aspect of government which confirms it as belonging in the social realm more than in the public realm. In Arendt’s conceptual framework, or logical geography, the political actor is actually a spectator critic, an onlooker, the public intellectual as I have labelled him or her, who is not actually involved in making laws at all. He is, rather, the occupant of a space open to all equally, there are no entry qualifications (save perhaps for being an ‘exile and marginal’<sup>600</sup>). This makes communication possible. However, if it is the judgement of the spectator that effectively creates the public space, are the resources of the onlooker alone enough to guarantee the continued existence of this intangible sphere?

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599 Bernard Wasserstein, ‘Blame the Victim: Hannah Arendt among the Nazis – the Historian and her Sources’, in *The Times Literary Supplement* (9 October 2009): 13–15.

600 Said, *Representations*, xvi.

It seems to me that in reality the guarantee that Arendtian public space will continue to endure, must surely depend upon a number of *material* and not just constitutional conditions being met, too. Arendt neglected to discuss these. Individuals must, for example be permitted to gather and to speak to each other without fear of being accused of conspiracy or other unlawful intentions; there must be freedom of speech; there must surely be a free media and freedom of the press; there would need to be free access to libraries and databases as well as to public records; free movement nationally and internationally and so on and so forth. Without such material conditions being met what hope could there be that Arendt's public realm would persist? Nevertheless, with all of these material conditions in place, I think that her rejoinder might well have been, that without the writer, the scholar, the thinker, the intellectual, who is committed to retrieving, from the past, fragments of *genuine* experience that can be fused with current experience to create a 'new now', something beyond him or herself, no *genuine* public discussion, no intelligibility, would be possible at all:

I ask you about us. I know  
 why you so blissfully touch: because the caress withhold,  
 because it does not vanish, the place that you  
 so tenderly cover; because you perceive thereunder  
 pure duration. Until your embraces almost  
 promise eternity.

(Second Elegy)<sup>601</sup>

To return finally to Little Rock, Elizabeth Eckford should never have been given the responsibility that was handed to her, Arendt believed. There were, she thought, no moral grounds on which this could be justified. As with much of her other writing, Arendt's reasoning confounded many but she had, as we have seen, clear grounds for thinking in the way that she did. In the case of the 'Battle of Little Rock' we are led, I

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601 Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, Leishman and Spender translation, 37.

think, not just to the rights and wrongs of this particular event but in addition to the very core of Hannah Arendt's message about the nature of politics and the responsibility of the public intellectual as a spectator who can benefit from making reasoned judgements, not just from a unique perspective, but additionally from an understanding distance.

## CONCLUSION

### Hannah Arendt: An Intellectual in Exile

*Denn offen ist es bei dir und hell. (Where you are at home, everything is open and light.)*<sup>602</sup>

*For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live [yet] in the end, the writer is not allowed to live in his writing.*<sup>603</sup>

The anxiety and edginess expressed in the extract from Theodor Adorno above reinforces his expression of unhappiness at living in exile, already suggested by my earlier reference to the fact that ‘at no moment during [his] emigration did [he] relinquish the hope of coming back’ – to Europe, to Germany.<sup>604</sup> Adorno’s personal experience of life in America, if unhappy, was not totally bereft of humour, as Anson Rabinbach has pointed out.<sup>605</sup> Nevertheless, it lead him to judge exile resolutely, I think, as cheerless, unsatisfying, gloomy. In his 1993 Reith lectures, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said on the other hand, in enthusing over the ideal of autonomy, reinterpreted exile and marginality in order to disclose their advantages rather than their associated anxieties.<sup>606</sup> It strikes me that, in reflecting both on the Arendtian public intellectual and on Arendt’s own personal achievement, Said’s thoughts about those ‘embarrassing troublemakers who do not toe the party line’, has some valuable insights to offer.<sup>607</sup>

602 Friedrich Nietzsche, cited in and translated by Erich Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche*, 100.

603 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 38–39.

604 See footnote 28 above.

605 Anson Rabinbach, ‘Mimesis and Antisemitism: Horkheimer & Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, or: Why Were The Jews Sacrificed?’, audio recording available from the Slought Foundation at University of Pennsylvania, 3 March 1999, source: <http://slought.org/content/11033/> (Accessed 10 September 2008).

606 See footnote 56 above.

607 Said, *Representations*, 59.

First, the exile is resourceful. He, or she, ‘learn[s] to make do in circumstances of shaky instability that would confound or terrify most people’.<sup>608</sup> ‘Knowledge and freedom’ acquire their meaning because of ‘experiences actually lived through’ rather than as a result of pure contemplation or abstract theorising.<sup>609</sup> To recall Hannah Arendt: ‘my assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings’.<sup>610</sup> Thought alone, in other (Kantian) words, deprived of content would, of course, simply be empty. Arendt’s turn to politics and the contribution she made to political philosophy from the late nineteen fifties until her death in 1975 was rooted precisely in lived *experience*, the lived experience of having witnessed the appearance of totalitarianism and the attempted annihilation of European Jewry by the Nazis. It was these events that triggered a change in direction of her thought, though not in her basic concerns. In recounting the story of the origins of totalitarianism – ‘All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them’, she wrote, quoting the novelist, Isak Dinesen<sup>611</sup> – it suddenly occurred to her (‘dawned’ on her) that she was thinking about politics, not just history.

Said has more to offer on this point, though: ‘Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation’.<sup>612</sup> Hannah Arendt’s first major work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, was a study of a unique *political* phenomenon manifest through National Socialism and Stalinism. Yet her analysis of the forbidding and dehumanising isolation that the victims of the Nazi death camps and Soviet

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608 Ibid.

609 Ibid.

610 See footnote 62 above.

611 Arendt, *HC*, 175.

612 Said, *Representations*, 60.



Gulags were subjected to, did not apply just to the Nazi Germany or to Stalinist Russia. Arendt perceived the very same conditions that succeeded in reducing a life spent amongst others to one that denied their plurality, replicated in the mass society of her adopted homeland, the United States of America. If, having finished *The Origins*, she realised then, that she had been writing a book about politics even more than about history, it must surely have occurred to her too, that this was not a book purely about totalitarianism, but that it also addressed her current experience in 1950s America, exposing the iniquities of capitalism (though she never framed her arguments against capitalism, as such) and modern democracy too.

The second advantage of being an exiled intellectual that Said identified in his *Reith Lectures* involved ‘see[ing] things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way’.<sup>613</sup> Of course, such an attitude is not exclusive to the exiled intellectual, but again it was true of Hannah Arendt. Her approach to thinking confirmed that trying to make the world intelligible to ourselves *constitutes* who we are as human beings. Human nature is not a given or fixed, something, that is distinct from whatever we might think about ourselves. Thinking about who we are and what, in fact, we are, turn out to be one and the same. Thus, notwithstanding the fundamental ontology that Arendt believed she had identified as conditioning human existence, she always believed that we are able to *alter* the way in which we live. Her thought was thus rooted in history from the start, as I have argued. We are not beings who have simply to obey laws of human nature from which we are unable to escape. It is possible for us to *re-orient* the way we think and respectfully reorganise ourselves by transfiguring institutions to which we are not bound to show passive reverence. To

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613 Ibid.

this extent Arendt remained, I think, broadly in agreement with Heidegger, although not with the political theories of Hobbes, Locke or Rousseau.

Finally, Said suggested, exile discharges the intellectual from conventional preoccupations and pursuits: 'wherever you end up you cannot simply take up life and become just another citizen of the new place'.<sup>614</sup> Hannah Arendt, whatever else she may have been, certainly was never 'just another citizen'. Unlike Walter Benjamin, who has been described as 'a rag picker amongst the ruins' (Benjamin himself used the expression in his essays on Charles Baudelaire, for example<sup>615</sup>) on account of the fact that he never attained an academic post, Hannah Arendt lectured at Chicago and Columbia Universities, and, of course, at the New School for Social Research in New York.<sup>616</sup> However, while she was never isolated like Benjamin she was never part of the Establishment either, and never sought to be. She was too independent-minded and outspoken for that. 'Exile', observes Rajeev Patke, 'gives Said's intellectual a position oblique to society. In that condition, the intellectual becomes a conscientious critic of society, a champion of unorthodoxies and principles, and an antidote to the compromises of the assimilated insider'.<sup>617</sup> We have seen how Arendt's 'oblique' approach to what occurred over Little Rock lost her friends. The same happened in respect of what she wrote about the Eichmann trial, *A Report on the Banality of Evil*. In addition to the public exchange of letters with Scholem to which I have already referred above, her longstanding friendship with

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614 Ibid., 61–62.

615 Walter Benjamin, 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, edited by Michael Jennings and translated by Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.

616 Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought & Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem & Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 120.

617 Rajeev Patke, 'Walter Benjamin: the Intellectual in a Straw Hat', presented at a Workshop on the 'Role of Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century', 18 August 1998, University of Haifa, Israel. (6<sup>th</sup> ISSEI Conference) Source: [http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellpatke/Benjamin/benjamin\\_intellectual.htm](http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellpatke/Benjamin/benjamin_intellectual.htm) (Accessed 1 February 2010).

Hans Jonas suffered, for example. He dispatched to her in 1963, in response to what she had already published, a letter that expressed, not just his exasperation, but sheer despondency.<sup>618</sup> In it he wrote:

When I read, with horror, the third article [Jonas is referring to the *New Yorker*] of “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” I meant to implore you by telegraph to at least abstain from a German version. [...] But then, in mind of the lesson I increasingly learned over the years that you are not open to reasons, do not like listening to anyone and always simply want to be in the right, I said to myself: there is no point.<sup>619</sup>

Altercations of this sort, of which Hannah Arendt had more than a few, and her preference for staying on the fringes of society should not lead us to conclude however, that she spent her life isolated in an intellectual hinterland. Very far from it, she was, we might say, always well connected and never very far from the centre of events. And this should not come as a surprise. The essence of her thought and writings was from the start focussed, as I have tried to argue, on the question of what it means to be with others. Her teacher, Martin Heidegger, had introduced her to this question but I think that, for reasons I have set out above, the answer he provided in the course of addressing the ‘Being question’ painted a picture of Dasein and depicted the social life of ‘being-with-one-another’ in somewhat dispiriting terms that Hannah Arendt, ‘a real sunshine child’, simply felt herself unable to accept.<sup>620</sup> What I have tried to show therefore, is that in each of her works I have chosen to discuss, beginning with her 1929 dissertation on Saint Augustine’s treatment of love, first one and subsequently two questions, in effect, were continuously playing in her mind and

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618 The letter is published as ‘Appendix D’ in Christian Wiese, *The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 181–186.

619 Ibid., 181.

620 ‘A real sunshine child’ was an expression used by Arendt’s parents. Cited in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 13.

set the context for what she wrote. The first question concerned whether an alternative depiction of *being with others* could be offered to counter Heidegger's sombre portrayal of *das Man*. As early as the dissertation, she thought just such an alternative account was indeed possible and she looked to Saint Augustine for direction and illumination. At this time her response to Heideggerian ontology was formulated in empirical terms, in terms, that is, of human history. And Arendt continued to rely upon history, essentially *Geschichte*, significant moments that changed the course of thinking, as she went on to discuss the Jewish question, that is, the question specifically concerning the being of the Jews with non-Jews.

It was with the appearance of what she would describe as totalitarian government that everything was to change, however. Already, we can see that prior to the events of the Second World War, Arendt, like Rilke, like Nietzsche, like Heidegger, was conscious that man's relationship to God was no longer what it had been. If what Nietzsche had claimed was anything to go by, God was, in fact, dead and had been for some time. This pronouncement of seismic historical proportions in and of itself, of course, paved the way for, indeed demanded, new ways of thinking, a new way of orienting ourselves to the world. However, if totalitarianism and the *Shoah* only reinforced this, they did so by taking Hannah Arendt along untrodden paths. Still the question of what possibilities exist for *being with others* was, I think, at the forefront of her mind but, her political conversion, as it were, demonstrated that it was not only Heidegger to whom she needed to respond. Totalitarianism, a unique form of terror-based government, whose chilling logic it was to eradicate human plurality, was an evil that needed to be addressed.

In doing so, the second question that perturbed Hannah Arendt, a question concerning the nature of the spaces in which beings can expect to encounter one another, manifest itself. If she had been unpersuaded that Heidegger's environmental assessment of the practical relations between human beings exhausted all the possible accounts that could be given of the spatial dimensions in which such beings might meet with one another socially, totalitarianism demonstrated that it was the absurd intention of some to extinguish the space separating people altogether. In the twentieth century, the Nazi concentration and death camps and the Soviet Gulags were testimony to such insanity. What had this involved? It had involved the destruction of human dignity and integrity and enforcement of human beings living in proximity to one another as if there were no distinction between them, as if plurality were no longer a condition of human life on earth. Totalitarianism represented then, the death of politics. There was an even more sinister lesson to be learned, though. Arguably the most frightening consequence of making the horrors of totalitarianism intelligible, was, as I have attempted to argue, that Arendt identified in the social and political arrangements of the very countries that had combined to defeat Nazism, and which fiercely opposed Stalinism, a tendency to isolate their citizens in a manner, ironically, not dissimilar to that novel and calamitous form of government. In the nineteen sixties then, her focus shifted from the possibilities generally, of being with others, to specifically the nature of political being and to what is meant by public discourse.

All of which brings me to an estimate of Hannah Arendt's achievement. Near the end of my introductory chapter I gestured towards asking this question: would a political realm along the lines presented to us by Hannah Arendt serve us any better than our current arrangements? Perhaps with Habermas' criticisms in mind, I asked, would the

public space to which her spectator-judges retreat – their ears tightly closed to so much of the daily buzzing inside the rest of the human swarm – *reduce* their chances of making the world around us intelligible rather than improve them? Was the ‘new concept of humanity’<sup>621</sup> Arendt had formulated by the nineteen sixties, indicating politically astute and politically articulate beings, yet conditional upon a reconstituted and heavily censored public discourse, actually little more than a phantom? We are, of course, already aware of Arendt’s modesty underscored by the proposal with which she began *The Human Condition* to the effect that she would be concerned in that book with no more than *thinking* about what we are doing. I am not sure though, whether making intelligible the complex (the human condition) or the incomprehensible (totalitarianism), was her lasting achievement. In a rather different, though similarly self-effacing, personal reflection she indicated that in seeking to make sense of the world in which she was resident, to let it open up to her, she hoped she might ‘find [her] way around in reality without selling [her] soul to it the way people in earlier times sold their souls to the devil’.<sup>622</sup> I think that we should understand this to imply that her quest was not for an ultimate *ur*-experience; it was not even for the conceptual apparatus adequate to a much more limited task, relatively speaking, of understanding. Rather, finding her way around in the world surely involved her relations with *others*, something that was very important to her and something too, that was reflected as much in her philosophy as it was in her politics. I would speculate that, had totalitarianism never manifest itself, had there never been an attempt to annihilate European Jewry, Hannah Arendt would still have been concerned with the possibilities in regard to *being-with-others*. She would still have been intent on addressing, in response to Heidegger, those two fundamental

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621 See footnote 1.

622 Hannah Arendt, ‘Dedication to Karl Jaspers’ in *EiU*, 213.

questions: is there a sense in which men can be together with each other in public that is not dictated by the Heideggerian depiction of *das Man*? Can there be a public space in which, when men discourse with each other, it is not questions that suggest merely practical solutions that preoccupy them? In answering ‘yes’ to both of these questions Hannah Arendt, in looking to the ancient Greeks for answers to her fundamental questions, as indeed Heidegger had looked to them for answers to the Being question, might have felt that hers was a more faithful appreciation of life in ancient in the polis than was her former teacher’s. Given their very different philosophical objectives, we should not be surprised by this, however.

In his 1962 review of Hannah Arendt’s *Between Past and Future*, Michael Oakeshott, Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics, distinguished between three types of intellectual historian.<sup>623</sup> First, there are those who project, as it were, a beam of light into some previously unexplored corner of the conceptual terrain throwing into relief ideas and beliefs heretofore ‘neglected’ thereby *adding* ‘something to what we think of as our stock of knowledge’. Then there are those who, by shining light from a ‘new direction’ the source of which is a novel and authority-claiming hypothesis, aspire to *reconfigure* even the ‘most solid conformations’ of the logical geography itself – an endeavour which, all too frequently in the judgement of the reviewer, produces more in the way of obfuscation than clarification due to the contentiousness of the hypotheses. Finally, there are those who resist the attraction of a single glowing organising premise, but who nevertheless possess the gift of being able to *illuminate* afresh what is already familiar ground populated by instantly recognisable features, such that ‘a new pattern of light and shade [transfigures] the

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<sup>623</sup> Michael Oakeshott, Review of Hannah Arendt’s, *Between Past and Future*, in *Political Science Quarterly*, 77 (1962): 88–90.

whole landscape'.<sup>624</sup> In Oakeshott's estimation, Hannah Arendt was such a luminary.<sup>625</sup> The judgement that she reminded us of what we already know but, perhaps, have forgotten, is I think, generous but plausible. However, I also think that of more profound import was the fact that she reminded us too, that thinking and the illumination it brings are, ultimately, dependent upon the company we keep and the conversations we engage in with others. Deprived of such company, thinking amounts to nothing. Of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing she wrote:

And yet he, who was polemical to the point of contentiousness, could no more endure loneliness than the excessive closeness of a brotherliness that obliterated all distinctions. He was never eager really to fall out with someone with whom he had entered into a dispute; he was concerned solely with humanizing the world by incessant and continual discourse about its affairs and the things in it. He wanted to be the friend of many men, but no man's brother.<sup>626</sup>

With these words, Hannah Arendt could, I think, just as easily have been writing about herself.

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<sup>624</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>625</sup> Oakeshott was, in this regard, at odds with Isaiah Berlin, who believed Hannah Arendt to be a hedgehog, guided by a single idea, rather than a fox open to many ideas. See Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Orion Books, 1992).

<sup>626</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing', in Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 30.



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