

The (Dis)appearance of Politics:
Hannah Arendt's Phenomenology of Freedom and Meaning in the Public Realm

A THESIS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History and

The Faculty of the Department Philosophy

Colorado College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

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April 17, 2019

HONOR CODE STATEMENT

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance for this assignment. I have upheld the Colorado College Honor Code through the production of this thesis.

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ABSTRACT

The twentieth century political philosopher Hannah Arendt developed a convincing phenomenological way of understanding political existence. Her writings have potential to shed light on many of the trials and dysfunctions that we see in today's society. Arendt believed that in ancient politics, the public realm was a space where people could act in freedom to disclose who they were and give their individual lives meaning. Arendt believed we have lost this public realm in the modern age. This thesis attempts to trace how and why Arendt came to these views, through an in-depth examination of her concept of politics and its relationship to freedom and meaningful life. It then examines how her insights can help us understand the way contemporary digital technologies, particularly social media, are influencing our current political experiences.

Keywords: freedom, politics, public realm, action, earthly immortality, meaningfulness, digital media technology, laboring society, consumerism, appearance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

According to Hannah Arendt, thinking occurs in solitude, but thankfully writing this thesis did not have to. I'd first like to thank my family and the Boettcher Foundation for giving me the gift of a liberal arts education at Colorado College and supporting me in studying the not-so-practical subjects that have moved me and shaped who I am as a person. Second, I'd like to thank all of the professors I've had at CC who have inspired me, challenged me, and changed the way I think. A special thanks to Yogesh Chandrani, who in an excellent class shattered my attachment to modern progress and has remained endlessly encouraging of my feeble attempts to fill the gap; Alberto Hernandez-Lemus, who supported my philosophically-motivated travels to Chiapas, Mexico and connected me with incredible friends there; John Grace, who I will forever see as a spiritual guide to the horrors and wonders of Nietzsche; and Eve Grace, whose teachings have immensely elevated the rigor of my philosophical thought and, with her incredible dedication to her students, inspires them to be serious about philosophy.

On that note, I'd also like to thank the students in Eve's yearlong Tutorial course, with whom I've had wonderful, insightful conversations that never fail to impact me: Folke Egerstrom, Kathryn Kenny, Elliot Williams, David Salgado, Jaysha Schwindt, Yumiko Gonzalez, and Ethan Cutler. I'd also like to thank the students with whom I workshopped this thesis in Susan Ashley's senior essay course, including Max Vivado, Catherine Luchars and Abe Lahr. I've also been lucky to have many philosophical friends and academic mentors, including Kate Barnes, Katie Lawrie, Izzy Steucek, Nathan Davis, and Eliot Mamet. One peer, friend, travel partner, and occasional debate instigator deserves his own few sentences, because this thesis (nor anything I ever write) would not be here if not for Ethan Cutler. Ethan, I've so enjoyed having a thought partner with whom to have incredible conversations that seem like they have been going on for four years, and I hope they can continue for four (or forty!) more.

Finally, my two advisors, Jonathan Lee and Susan Ashley, deserve not only a thanks but some kind of special award for tolerating and supporting my long and indecisive process in writing this thesis. Your feedback throughout the process has been invaluable. I feel so incredibly lucky to have had both of you with me on this journey. You are both transformational forces, as advisors, teachers, and most importantly, as people.

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INTRODUCTION

Painless and effortless consumption would not change but would only increase the devouring character of biological life ... The danger of future automation is less the much-deplored mechanization and artificialization of natural life than that, its artificiality notwithstanding, all human productivity would be sucked into an enormously intensified life process and would follow automatically, without pain or effort, its ever-recurrent natural cycle.¹

The internet is where we live. It's where we do business, where we meet, where we fall in love. It is the central platform for business, culture, and personal relationships. There's not much else left ... The internet isn't a luxury addition to life; for most people, knowingly or not, it is life.²

If journalist and internet technologist Ben Hammersley is right that the internet is life, our experience of life can be understood as a constant stream of information and images. On social media, we relate to our dearest friends and express our most deeply held opinions in the same way we relate to corporations that want our money, politicians who want our support, and websites that want our views: with glance, a scroll, a share, or a click of the “Like” button. We can zoom past curated memories (*Five years ago today, you had the worst day of your life!*), disturbing headlines (*US Workers are paying higher taxes without any of the benefits*), advertiser's exhortations (*Finally move freely in these yoga pants!*), curated images (*Emily Fogel updated her profile picture!*), opinions we find repulsive (*Meme depicting an airplane labeled “feminists” flying towards a country labeled “Equal Rights” and away from a country labeled “Equal Responsibilities”*), and opinions we don't understand (*Bassnectar just dropped some real world wisdom on some unsuspecting minds at Coachella, I wonder how many ego deaths are happening tonighttt.*) The constant stream feeds us decontextualized bits of private life, celebrity

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Originally published in 1958, cited henceforth as HC, 132.

² Ben Hammersley, “My Speech to the Information Assurance Advisory Council” (speech, September 9, 2011), <https://www.benhammersley.com/2011/09/my-speech-to-the-iaac/>.

scandal, community organization, and matters of grave communal consequence, without distinguishing their character in any legible way.

If Hannah Arendt is right, this new life we are living will “devour” us, changing the framework in which we are able to produce, communicate, and exist politically. The contemporary media landscape presents us with an unprecedented quantity, variety, and frequency of new information about all realms of human life, which in all past eras could have only occupied separate contexts in time and space. Of course, we still have lives that occur outside of the internet, but they are increasingly connected through it. Social media may not be a totalizing apparatus that controls our every move, but even so, surely it has altered the way we view our world and ourselves. Specifically, Arendt would be concerned that the internet has a) made it difficult to distinguish meaningful and worthwhile aspirations from those that are futile or vain, b) disconnected us from the actual world and prevented us from gathering with each other within it, c) made it all but impossible to live out our private lives in public, and d) facilitated the transformation of ours into a society entirely preoccupied with consumption at the expense of the freedom and meaningfulness that can be found in political life.

I acknowledge the peculiarity of asserting that the psychological and political impacts of the internet can be illuminated by the works of a German-Jewish political theorist who died decades before Facebook came into existence and was best known for her controversial take on a widely-publicized trial of a Nazi official. But Arendt’s relevance today goes much beyond classifying political systems or commenting on particular events. As her biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl writes, Arendt’s aim was to discover “basic experiences” prevalent in human life and identify what was “new, without precedent,”³ in specific historical contexts. In Majid Yar’s

³ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 8.

words, Arendt's methodology is a "phenomenological reconstruction of the nature of political existence," an undertaking inspired by her background in German existentialism and directed toward the political world.⁴ Rather than trying to define and rework old political concepts for new aims, Arendt begins her inquiries by looking at human experiences and attempts to understand their meaning to us, revealing the complex story of how the conditions of our thinking have arisen.⁵ In light of her phenomenological method, we could think of Arendt as doing intellectual history for the sake of philosophical thinking.⁶ The lives we live out on digital media technology are a new human experience in desperate need of this kind of illumination. Thus, Hannah Arendt's insights about the basic experiences that preceded our time are thus extremely useful if we wish to "think what we are doing" in our political lives now.⁷

Of course, Arendt focused her phenomenological toolbox on a certain type of political experience: the fundamental forces behind the appalling destruction of the first part of the twentieth century. She wanted to understand not only the Holocaust but Communist totalitarianism in the Soviet Union, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the subsequent waves of war and political violence that followed. But Arendt was not consumed by the horror. She was also concerned with the rapid transformations of industrial technology, conformism, consumerism, and a loss of tradition and identity. Arendt saw these as

⁴ Majid Yar, "Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/arendt/>. Arendt's philosophical education was shaped by the largely apolitical German existential tradition of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers.

⁵ Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, 10.

⁶ Thinking of Arendt's work in this way also presents a path beyond the debate about whether Arendt was a philosopher or a political theorist. As Young-Bruehl points out, Arendt herself was reluctant to call herself a philosopher, since she was "very critical of the attitude toward politics she thought endemic to philosophy," yet she questioned their methods philosophically, "as a reformer." (*For Love of the World*, 321.) Arendt's work as a political phenomenologist transcends the categories of political theory, philosophy, and intellectual history, as they all inform a better understanding of our human experience.

⁷ This was Arendt's stated purpose of writing *The Human Condition*: "What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing." HC, 5.

problems that plagued the post-war world. Her work thus gives us a theory of how the modern age⁸ transformed the existential categories of politics, paving the way for both the everyday afflictions of mass society and the horrors of mass destruction to arise. Thus, her framework of understanding political categories is relevant even for a topic she never had the chance to examine herself.

My aim in this thesis is to examine Arendt's work on the relationship of political life to freedom and meaningfulness, and to inquire how that relationship has changed in the modern age. To do so requires an in-depth understanding of Arendt's concept of politics. This is, clearly, one of the broadest topics she tackles, but one without which the rest of her thought cannot be understood. My project is thus to piece apart what Arendt thought politics was, is, and could be, and ultimately make a case for Arendt's notion of the public realm. I will then explore the connection between politics and the new mechanization of life that digital media technologies have introduced, in order to examine how that public realm is doing today.

This thesis is divided into four main sections. Part One briefly explores how Arendt's life experience, intellectual encounters, and historical context informed her thinking, and situates her impact in the intellectual context of twentieth century political philosophy. Part Two attempts to elucidate Arendt's esteem of the political as constitutive of meaningfulness and freedom in human life and make an argument that her understanding of the political is compelling. I consider a) the connection she made between politics and "meaningfulness", b) her framework for understanding political freedom, c) her understanding of what it takes for politics to be meaningful, and d) the difficulties of realizing her concept of politics in the modern world. Part

⁸ Throughout, I will use the term "modern age" as Arendt does, referring to the 17th century Enlightenment-era up to the 20th century. Arendt uses the term "modern world," by contrast, to refer to the 20th century post-war world. HC, 6.

Three explores how Arendt might characterize our contemporary situation in regards to the influence of the contemporary social media landscape on politics. Throughout, I aim to advance the view that Arendt inspires an understanding of politics as existentially central, in which politics is viewed not as a means to outside ends, but as the very space of human freedom.

PART ONE

FOR LOVE OF THE WORLD: ARENDT'S LIFE AND WORK IN CONTEXT

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's definitive biography of Hannah Arendt is aptly titled "For Love of the World."⁹ Arendt's life is a story of how, through dark times, she still came to love the world of man-made things that unite us with one another. Arendt refused to be bogged down by the thoughtless patterns of mass society; just as she sought to "think what we are doing" in her work, in her life she learned to think what *she* was doing.

The historical context Hannah Arendt found herself in as a Jew fleeing Nazi Germany was obviously formative in directing the concerns and urgency of her political thought. Arendt was born in 1906 in Hanover, Germany to Martha and Paul Arendt, both Reform Jews with little affinity to their religious and ethnic identity.¹⁰ Despite a somewhat troubled childhood amidst the early death of her father and the threat of the First World War, Arendt was a brilliant student interested in poetry, theology, history, philosophy, languages and literature.¹¹ As a university student, Arendt showed an early interest in Christian theology before meeting Martin Heidegger in Marburg and being swept up into his world of groundbreaking existential thought (intellectually and on an intense personal level, in a now-highly-dramatized secret love affair).¹² Arendt later wrote her dissertation with Karl Jaspers,¹³ a neuropsychiatrist-turned philosopher whose thought, under the guidance of his teacher Max Weber, had turned toward trying to think

⁹ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24-34.

¹² *Ibid.*, 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

about “how human beings fulfill—or fail to fulfill—their human possibilities,”¹⁴ a theme that would continue to permeate Arendt’s work throughout her life.

The German existential tradition that Arendt immersed herself in was decisively apolitical. Arendt had never seemed set back by her status as a Jewish woman pursuing a doctorate in philosophy, partly thanks to a self-assured personality and partly thanks to her education being timed with short-lived fortunate social circumstances in Germany.¹⁵ But as the Nazi Party came to power, Arendt was forced to confront the rapidly disintegrating political and cultural environment around her. She began to identify more with her Jewishness, which “was partly foisted upon her by circumstances, by the indisputable fact that her environment thought her a Jew and that such Jewishness increasingly had a number of consequences.”¹⁶ Before others in her circle seemed appropriately worried that Hitler was a genuine political threat, Arendt had already grown restless with “intellectuals who failed to understand the darkening political situation”¹⁷ and more convinced that the Zionist critique of assimilation was correct: in this political context, at least, assimilating would require assimilating to anti-Semitism.¹⁸

Arendt became involved with the Zionists’ underground railroad system. This led to contact with Marxism, another ideological position that she engaged with throughout this time in her life.¹⁹ Namely, she offered up her apartment as a refuge for fleeing Communists (though

¹⁴ Ibid., 64

¹⁵ Gisela T. Kaplan, “Hannah Arendt: The Life of a Jewish Woman,” in *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom*, ed. Gisela T. Kaplan and Clive S. Kesler (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwen, 1989), 82. Kaplan notes that Arendt “grew up in an environment that fostered inner strength and the development of a secure identity,” as well as being “handed the fruits of women’s and Jewish emancipation on a platter.”

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹⁷ Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 98.

¹⁸ Ibid., 92.

¹⁹ Arendt would eventually emphatically diverge from both of these ideologies. Nonetheless, her body of work was influenced not only by her intellectual engagement with Zionism and Marxism, but also by the fact that her introduction into “action” as such began in the cross-section of these two movements.

Arendt was careful to emphasize that she had never identified as a Communist).²⁰ After Arendt was arrested, detained, and interrogated by police, she decided to flee.²¹ She and her mother fled in 1933, first to Prague, then to Geneva, then to Paris, where she re-joined her first husband and took a position with the Zionist organization Youth Aliyah helping to organize the resettlement of refugee children in what was then Palestine.²² By 1938, however, Hitler had annexed Austria and the Popular Front government in France fell, and French Jews were not sympathetic to those in exile. In 1940 all German refugees were stripped of their citizenship and sent to internment camps. Hannah Arendt was sent to Gurs, where she “reach[ed] one of the lowest points in her life as she contemplated the world situation.”²³ By the sheer luck of having a few days of chaos of miscommunication after the defeat of France, she was able to secure liberation papers, escape to a friend’s house in Montauban, and in October secure a rare visa to America along with her second husband Heinrich Blucher.²⁴

There, she sought teaching positions and continued her work with Zionist organizations, writing public opinions for Jewish newspapers on the prospect of a state Israel and the political status of Jews in Europe. But she grew increasingly critical of Jewish leadership in the face of the Final Solution. Meanwhile, although she admired and held high hopes for many aspects of Jewish settlement in Palestine, she grew increasingly fearful that Zionism was beginning to take on a hypocritical and disastrous colonizing project.²⁵ Isolated by her independent opinions,

²⁰ Melvyn A. Hill, *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 333-334. At a conference in Toronto, Arendt proudly proclaimed that she had never identified as a conservative, or a liberal, or a communist, or a socialist. The only group she was ever part of was the Zionists, and she always thought of her political awakening and work in the resistance movement as being motivated by her identity as a Jew. And while Arendt continued to engage at a distance with Marxist thinkers and political parties throughout her life, it was of course her being a Jew that characterized her exile.

²¹ Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 106.

²² *Ibid.*, 138.

²³ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 155-158.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 183

Arendt stopped going to Zionist conferences and withdrew markedly from the public debate on the matter. When her voice resurfaced as the controversial reporter of the Eichmann trials in 1961, it was met with scorn.

As Young-Bruehl puts it, even while Arendt accomplished the remarkable feat of becoming “a public figure during her stateless years,” she was always frustrated with her attempts at political action, “convinced that she was, by temperament and talents, unsuited for it.”²⁶ This fueled her desire to think beyond ideologies, and think about political action beyond mere electoral and confrontational party politics. Turning away from her frustration with politics, she began to focus on writing her groundbreaking historical study, *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt then became known as a political theorist, which would take her back into finding a political understanding of the existential tradition from which she came.

Arendt’s concern with the implications of modern politics on the *meaning* of human life is somewhat unique compared to other more well-known schools of political thought that sprung from the same context. To be fair, plenty of other historians and political thinkers were serious about the horror of the twentieth century and the possibility that it emerged from a long historical process. For example, the Frankfurt School, a group of German-Jewish intellectuals, most of whom had also taken refuge in the United States, had their own explanation of the horror of the twentieth century. Combining Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, the critical theorists sought “to try to understand why German workers, instead of freeing themselves from capitalism by means of socialist revolution, were seduced by modern consumer capitalist society and, fatefully,

²⁶ Ibid., 113. (“Hannah Arendt certainly was not what she called a ‘political animal.’ But what she had learned from practical activity and from being a public figure during her stateless years laid the foundations for her political theory.”)

Nazism.”²⁷ Others, such as American political theorist John Rawls, proposed neatly rational theories upon which to base a politics that respected rights and fairness. His systematic and meticulous theory of “justice as fairness” posited a methodology for arriving at an ideal political arrangement: political actors must go behind a “veil of ignorance” in which they imagine themselves as generic citizens who could hypothetically occupy any race, class, gender, and station in society.²⁸ Rawls asserts that they would then consider the equal benefit of all for the sake of their own potential self-interest, and advocate political liberalism as the best way to do so.

I think Arendt would say that the ultimate problem of both these approaches comes down to their apparent failure to answer a simple question: why should an individual in our political context be moved to care about any politics that aims to satisfy material needs if those material needs are not their own? Both the critical theorists and the Rawlsian took what Arendt would say is a characteristically modern, and far too materialistic approach, treating politics as a series of questions of power (who decides?) and distribution of goods (who benefits?), goods which are in most cases material. In this framework, politics may encompass questions of rights, justice, and fairness, but its final end is the satisfaction of citizens’ material needs. This view is as prevalent today as it was when she was writing. For Arendt, as we will see, the pursuit of material welfare in politics in fact inhibits individuals from living free and meaningful lives.

Today, Hannah Arendt is widely lauded as one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century.”²⁹ However, “her writings do not easily come together into a systematic philosophy that expounds and expands upon a single argument over a sequence

²⁷ Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss* (New York: Verso Books, 2016), 7.

²⁸ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁹ Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves, “Hannah Arendt,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/>.

of works.”³⁰ While her work has spurred a continual flow of scholarship, there is really no such thing as “Arendtism,” because Arendt neither fits into a single established category in the intellectual tradition nor establishes one of her own. While most commentators label her closest to “civic republicanism,”³¹ she has also been called everything from a modernist to Grecophile, accused of being too liberal or too conservative, too complacent with modern liberal democratic politics or too radically critical of it.³² Her influence on political theory is thus everywhere and nowhere at once. Arendt left and intended to leave no coherent ideological theory to work within and against. Instead of telling us what to think, she urges us to begin thinking for ourselves.

While compelling, this presents significant challenges in reading and writing about Arendt. Often, believing she has found a concept buried in the layers of the past, she sees its meaning and its place clearly in her own schema and refrains from explaining this new schema in our own terms. It’s not that she writes abstractly—she is always grounded in history, refrains from jargon, and rarely discusses ideas out of context. The challenge in understanding Arendt lies in uncovering the new meaning she assigned to familiar words, and how Arendt explains the shifts in what they have meant to us. The joy of reading Arendt is that it is a practice in re-thinking all of our political concepts. But her ambiguity in redefining these familiar terms, of course, paves the way for confusion about what she actually meant.

I aim not only to explain Arendt’s concepts within the context of her own body of work, but also to give life to them by exploring how they square with the historical reality of her time

³⁰ Yar, “Hannah Arendt (1906-1975),” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

³¹ D’Entreves, “Hannah Arendt,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

³² Hill, *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 333-334. Arendt was well aware that her political affiliations were frustratingly ambiguous, explaining to her audience at a conference, “I don’t really know [her ideological alignment.] . . . And I suppose I never had any such position. You know the left think that I am conservative, and the conservatives sometimes think I am left or I am a maverick or God knows what. And I must say I couldn’t care less. I don’t think that the real questions of this century will get any illumination by this kind of thing.”

and the intellectual tradition within which she existed. Part of this work, for me, has meant moving past initial discomfort with Arendt's way of seeing certain things; her ideas often shatter the framework of modern liberal sensibilities, and it is sometimes difficult to see why she did not seem to think the same way as anyone else, before or since. But I believe it is worthwhile to trust that there is something behind her sometimes distasteful or confusing opinions. My methodology in this essay is thus partially inspired by Arendt's own methodology of deep thinking about "novelty" in human affairs. I consciously seek to relate her concepts to more familiar perspectives, to help both myself and the reader better understand them.

Throughout the essay I will also refer to secondary literature in order to raise further questions, discuss how other scholars have understood Arendt's ideas, and situate myself in the matrix of thinkers who have engaged with Arendt. The editors of an edition of *Philosophy Today* dedicated to Arendt attribute a "strange contemporaneity" to her work.³³ The authors point out that much recent scholarship has centered on historicizing Arendt's work by looking at her personal past and earlier essays in efforts "to move away from what we might call the 'standard interpretation,' or the reading which suggests that Arendt's primary aim was to rehabilitate the Greek polis and/or establish strict separations between various human activities and spheres of life."³⁴ But, they argue, "rather than assigning her a place within an intellectual tradition ... we tend to treat her as an immediate interlocutor."³⁵

I agree that we should engage with Arendt insofar as she speaks to our current political experience, rather than succumb to the standard interpretation of her project, which would eliminate its present resonance. However, I also wish to resist the tendency to merely apply

³³ Charles Barbour and Ari-Elmeri Hyvonen, "In the Present Tense: Contemporary Engagements with Hannah Arendt," *Philosophy Today* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 299-319, 300.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 300.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 301.

Arendt's ideas to modify or advance an existing framework of political theory, as do contemporary thinkers in biopolitics, post-colonial theory, or deliberative democratic politics. In the aforementioned journal issue, for example, Peg Birmingham published an essay entitled "Superfluity and Precarity: Reading Arendt against Butler."³⁶ While such a project might be interesting, I imagine that Arendt would be horrified to see her work applied to the disastrously postmodern question of "whether an ontology rooted in bodily precariousness [can] adequately address the production of superfluity which produces precarity as one of its effects."³⁷ Arendt wanted us to use precise and compelling terms to think about the world around us, not make further abstractions from already-abstract intellectual squabbles.³⁸ My essay diverges from such scholars in that I treat Arendt's work as offering an understanding of politics independent from any categorizable ideology or theoretical approach. I use these frameworks to understand and situate her thought, but I propose to re-examine Arendt's ideas *themselves* as they relate to contemporary politics and, in particular, the question of social media's influence on our political existence. This will have to begin, of course, with an in-depth examination of what Arendt thought politics was.

³⁶ Peg Birmingham, "Superfluity and Precarity: Reading Arendt Against Butler," *Philosophy Today* 62, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 319-336.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 320.

³⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), originally published in 1954, cited henceforth as BPF, 96. Arendt condemns the loss of meaning caused by the insistence on comparatively even less specialized jargon in academia in her day: "We have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness, so that, short of being condemned to live verbally in an altogether meaningless world, we grant each other the right to retreat into our own worlds of meaning, and demand only that each of us remain consistent within his own private terminology."

PART TWO ARENDRT'S CALL TO THE POLITICAL

I. The Meaning of Politics

[Sophocles] also let us know... what it was that enabled ordinary men, young and old, to bear life's burden: it was the polis, the space of men's free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendor— τὸν βίον λαμπρόν ποιείσθαι [the brilliant poetry of life].³⁹

Hannah Arendt's esteem of politics as the source of "brilliant poetry" and "splendor" in life may reasonably strike us as quite odd. Rarely today—and this has been the case throughout the modern age—is the political life exalted as poetic, splendorous, or desirable *in itself*. To the degree that we applaud (rather than disdain) those who enter political life, we usually commend them for an instrumental service: we laud political participation as a necessary, perhaps dreary, and usually burdensome duty for the purpose of upholding rights, institutions, and social services which allow us to pursue our own interests. For us, politics is related to flourishing only insofar as it allows us to "flourish" by fulfilling each of our private pursuits. To be sure, we may find a degree of inspiration, community, or sentimentality through certain forms of political participation. But for the most part, politics seems to be either the dreary work of men in suits arguing about the latest proposed tax increase, or a spectacle of rhetoric, celebrity, and power games that no reasonable person would ever call the peak of human flourishing. So why, then, does Arendt urge us to recover Sophocles' ancient reverence of politics?

Arendt's reverence is not for politics *as is*. Her praise of politics has little to do with the modern nation-state, the administration of its affairs, or electoral spectacles that dominate the news cycle. Her reverence is shaped by her understanding of ancient politics, which, she argues was characterized by an esteem of the public realm as a space of freedom and meaningful self-

³⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), originally published in 1965, cited henceforth as "OR," 273.

disclosure. The loss of this esteem has been so dramatic that it is extremely difficult to imagine what the public realm used to be. As Margaret Canovan points out, when Arendt argues that “the point of politics is not to cater for the interests of the population” she is well aware that she “collides with the most firmly established assumptions of the modern age.”⁴⁰ Harkening to the Athenian *polis*, Arendt challenges us to conceive of politics not as a means to securing private liberties and distributing resources but as the space where freedom is felt. For Arendt, to act in the public realm is a good in itself, rather than a means to securing private benefit. Rather than thinking of the role of politics as the protection of freedom, Arendt argues that freedom can only be found through politics.⁴¹ In this section, I hope to clarify Arendt’s compelling vision of a public realm in which spontaneous and free action can make political life, as Jerome Kohn puts it, “not only bearable, but meaningful.”⁴²

To do so, politics must not become consumed by “life itself” (Arendt also uses the terms “mere life” and “the life process”). These terms, for Arendt, connote an individual’s life understood as limited primarily by the condition of mortality. Conceiving of life in this way pits our lifetimes against a clock that is speeding toward our inevitable end. When an individual views his existence with an attitude solely within the terms of this condition, he is ruled by necessity, deprived of freedom to pursue anything higher than his own survival and pleasure. The condition of mortality limits human aspiration to self-preservation, which paradoxically can never fully be achieved so long as mortality remains a condition of human existence. It thus traps us in an essentially futile process which, Arendt argues, makes our lives and actions feel

⁴⁰ Margaret Canovan, “Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm” in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 187.

⁴¹ Arendt, HC, 198-200.

⁴² Jerome Kohn, “Freedom: The Priority of the Political,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* ed. Dana Villa (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126.

meaningless.⁴³ In the modern, “post-Christian” age, we are confronted with an empty void which belief in an eternal, divine realm and a higher order to human activities used to fill. Arendt, true to her training in theology and German existential philosophy, believes that all human beings yearn to fill this void, to seek purposes and experiences that transcend each their individual fleeting time on earth.

Meanwhile, modern political philosophers seem to have prescribed a cheap solution to our predicament: reconcile ourselves to life’s futility and live for pleasure in the moment. Hobbes, for example, would say that for political purposes, all of human activity can be riddled down to the pursuit of self-preservation. Arendt, by contrast, argues that in the public realm—and in fact *only* in the public realm—the purpose and impact of one’s activities can transcend the individual actor’s lifespan and thus give our lives higher meaning. She thus invokes a reinvigoration of the age-old yearning for “immortality.” The ancients, she argues, sought “earthly immortality”: they found meaning beyond the timespan of their deaths by enshrining their activities in the memory of the living.

This is not, of course, to say that preserving one’s own life is not important—one has to engage in the constant process of self-preservation and self-satisfaction in order to be prepared for these “higher” and more meaningful activities.⁴⁴ For Arendt, politics has the potential to *both* save human lives and help them become meaningful.

⁴³ Arendt, HC, 8.

⁴⁴ Canovan, “Arendt’s Theory of Totalitarianism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* ed. Dana Villa (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Canovan points out that this search for meaning is also connected with Arendt’s desire for politics to prevent totalitarianism, since its goal, as a “phenomenon that is purely destructive and futile,” was to literally speed millions of people toward death (33). The “senseless destruction” of totalitarianism “was connected with the increasingly widespread experience of superfluosity” (34), that is, of the fact that political life had become concerned with the futile process of life itself.

Arendt's phenomenology of politics permeates all of her work, but its theoretical terms are most clearly articulated and distinguished in *The Human Condition*. A brief summary of that work will be useful to the reader. The term "human condition" can be read as Arendt's attempt to offer an alternative to attempting to divine "human nature," or the immutable essence of human beings. Arendt writes that "it is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves—this would be like jumping over our own shadows."⁴⁵ Rather, "men are conditioned beings."⁴⁶ Everything we come into contact with—every natural and social process that affects human beings at all—changes who we as a species are, and we so can never fully know ourselves in the way philosophers have hoped. However, following 20th century existential and phenomenological methods, we can look to the world around us and the world of the past to better understand the range of possibilities that the human condition can take.

Arendt proposes that there are a few aspects of the human condition that, at least for now, are stable and inescapable: life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth.⁴⁷ Each person must be born (natality), each person must die (mortality), each must live among others who are different than they are (plurality), in the specific natural habitat of this planet (earth) but also within an "artificial" world of human-created things (worldliness).⁴⁸ Arendt proposes that there are three "fundamental activities" that constitute "human affairs." Labor is what one does purely to survive; it is constrained entirely by natality and mortality and is thus conditioned by the fact of life itself. Work is what one creates and puts into the "artificial"

⁴⁵ Arendt, HC, 10.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 7-9.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

world of human-created things; it is thus conditioned by the world and “bestow[s] a measure of permanence and durability” by creating things that will outlast one’s own life.⁴⁹ Action, activity that occurs directly between men and is thus conditioned by the fact of human plurality, goes beyond even the relative durability of work to “create the condition for remembrance, that is, for history.”⁵⁰ Left out of the book’s formal considerations but lingering behind its pages are the activities Arendt saw as the “life of the mind” or the *vita contemplativa*: thinking, willing, and judging.

Arendt is interested in how the perceived hierarchy of these activities has shifted throughout Western history, as well as how these activities have been classified into “private” and “public” realms. She traces four fundamental stages of the hierarchy of human activities: 1) ancient esteem for the life of action and contemplation, accompanied by degradation of work and labor; 2) Platonic and Christian ideals of contemplation as the only high form of activity, grouping action, work, and labor into the same category of earthly life; 3) the modern “reversal” of this hierarchy, elevating earthly life above contemplation; and 4) the elevation of labor to the top of the hierarchy of activities within the *vita activa*, so that all activities have begun to be considered in *terms* of the logic of labor. The modern primacy of the activity of labor has also established “life itself” as the primary political goal.

The rise of the laboring society is coeval with a transformation in the relationship between the public and private realms. In the ancient *polis*, according to Arendt’s understanding, the public and private realm were delineated with a firm boundary line, and activities belonging properly to the one were not to cross into the other. Success in each realm required completely different skill-sets, capacities, and views of life: “According to Greek thought, the human

⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 9.

capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home and the family.”⁵¹ The integrity of each realm depended upon the integrity of the other: “these two realms could only exist with coexistence.”⁵² The public realm was nonetheless viewed as superior, the space for the “higher” activities of life: “the distinction between private and public coincides with the opposition of necessity and freedom, of futility and permanence, and finally, of shame and honor.”⁵³

This did not mean the private realm was unimportant or did not offer its own pleasures. “The distinctive trait of the household sphere,” Arendt writes of the private realm, “was that in it men lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs. The driving force was life itself.”⁵⁴ While in the private realm, men lived under the burden of necessity and the conditions of inequality in household rule. The polis, however, was the “space of freedom” which demanded of its entrants the courage and willingness to present themselves in public in order to experience freedom in concert with others.⁵⁵ Freedom, as we will see, is threatened by the infiltration of “wants and needs” into the public realm. However, one can’t escape the demands of those wants and needs completely—one cannot live a life entirely in public.⁵⁶ Thus, “the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the polis.”⁵⁷ The private realm was construed as a necessary sphere upon which the public realm depended. “As far as members of the polis are concerned”—insofar as they are members of the polis and not private individuals attending to their own family and community—“household life exists for

⁵¹ Ibid., 24.

⁵² Ibid., 59.

⁵³ Ibid., 73.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 71: “A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense.”

⁵⁷ Ibid., 31.

the sake of the ‘good life’ in the polis.’”⁵⁸ These two realms had to be delineated, each protected equally, but sheltered from one another.⁵⁹

This separation of public and private is familiar to us insofar as we speak of the importance of privacy as a right and public spaces as properly accessible to all. But Arendt views the integrity of both realms in the modern world as totally corrupted and corroded. The rigid distinction between them has been blurred by the rise of “society,” which is the infiltration of properly private matters into the public realm. The blurring of this distinction and the elevation of laboring society, Arendt believes, has caused a disintegration of politics.

Arendt is often criticized for painting a historically inaccurate picture of the ancient *polis* and idealizing this inaccurate picture while glossing over its highly problematic and exclusionary features. In discussing her work, it is important to distinguish between her analysis of ancient politics, her critique of modern politics, and what she actually wants politics to be. Arendt was well-read in classical scholarship, but she took her conception of the *polis* almost directly from Aristotle⁶⁰ and may suffer from taking his depictions of ancient society too literally. Nonetheless, because it is not necessarily the historical reality of this concept of the *polis* that matters, none of her factual errors is significant enough to render her insights invaluable. And while she lauds certain aspects of ancient politics (both real and imagined) that seem to be built on gross injustices, we should not assume that she is telling us to bring these gross injustices back, nor that they are necessary to re-inspire a love of the public world in the modern age.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁰ Hannah Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Private and Public,” in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 273.

II. Arendt's Framework of Freedom

Arendt writes that freedom is the *raison d'être* of politics.⁶¹ “Without freedom,” she asserts, “political life as such would be meaningless.”⁶² Though this statement may appear to echo a hollow praise of freedom found throughout modern liberal theory, Arendt’s formulation actually breaks significantly with the chain of modern thinkers who have, as Arendt points out, considered “the appropriate region of human liberty” to be “the inward domain of consciousness.”⁶³ In other words, these thinkers tend to view freedom as the private joy found in doing what one wants to do. Arendt explains that this view of freedom is so commonplace in modern times that it is difficult to imagine freedom otherwise: “Our philosophical tradition is almost unanimous in holding that freedom begins where men have left the political life inhabited by the many, and that it is not experienced in association with others but in intercourse with oneself.”⁶⁴ Here, Arendt is pointing out two important aspects of the modern view of freedom: 1) it locates the experience of freedom in the “inward space into which men may escape from external coercion and *feel free*,”⁶⁵ and 2) it implies that freedom is only related to politics insofar as it demands that politics remove constraints upon individuals. She wants to push back on this apolitical understanding of freedom, which in her view relegates it to a futile and senseless pursuit. Throughout her work, she pushes a concept of freedom which is essentially experienced in public, since “the life of a free man need[s] the presence of others”⁶⁶ and is essentially codependent with political life rather than merely protected by it.

⁶¹ Arendt, BPF, 146.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 147.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁶ Arendt, OR, 21.

Moderns tend to hold the view that the expansion of politics threatens freedom. As Arendt puts it, we tend to believe that “politics is compatible with freedom only because and insofar as it guarantees a possible freedom *from* politics.”⁶⁷ Writing in the mid-20th century, Arendt is thus confronted with a grave challenge, not only because this view has been philosophically engrained, but also because recent experience of totalitarianism seems to confirm this centuries-old suspicion that freedom and politics are incompatible. Indeed, many of her contemporary political commentators understood totalitarianism as the subordination of all spheres of life to the demands of politics.⁶⁸ Arendt writes that, “We are inclined to believe that freedom begins where politics ends, because we have seen that freedom has disappeared when *so-called* political considerations overruled everything else.”⁶⁹

But according to Arendt, the idea that totalitarianism is the total domination of politics over all spheres of life is based on a misconception of politics as concerned only with life itself. By the beginning of the twentieth century, politics had long been abandoned as the sphere of human flourishing and relegated to the role of “appointed protector” of matters that are trivial and essentially futile.⁷⁰ We are accustomed to thinking of the role of politics as protecting individuals so that they are free to pursue their own conceptions of their own good, according to their own freely chosen values and ends, as long as they do not tread on the interests of others. Jurgen Habermas offers an insightful explanation of political liberalism: a citizen’s status is determined primarily by the individual (negative) rights he or she has *vis a vis* the state and other

⁶⁷ Arendt, BPF, 149.

⁶⁸ Canovan, “Arendt’s Theory of Totalitarianism,” 26. “Totalitarianism has been seen as an affliction caused by over-ambitious political ideas and radical actions...” the solution then is “to lower our expectations from politics and ideas alike, falling back on the unglamorous blessings of liberal politics, skeptical philosophy, and free market economics.”

⁶⁹ Arendt, BPF, 149. Emphasis mine.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

citizens, guaranteeing freedom of choice, which requires the noninterference of “external compulsion.”⁷¹ Thus, within the liberal nation-state, “politics must be concerned almost exclusively with the maintenance of life and the safeguarding of its interests.”⁷²

What's wrong with politics that is designed to maintain life and protect private interests? And *wouldn't* a political arrangement that does so successfully protect us from the rise of totalitarianism? The ubiquity of liberalism first of all means that politics loses its splendor and becomes banal—it must be focused on providing for the life process rather than more meaningful, enduring activities. In Arendt’s view, the freedom that political liberalism claims to give us is based on a flawed and incomplete conception of freedom in which freedom of choice has become ubiquitous at the expense of the freedom to actively participate in politics. Hence, in contrast to liberal theorists who identify the problem of totalitarianism as the encroachment of politics into all aspects of human life—meaning that the solution is “to lower our expectations from politics and ideas alike, falling back on the unglamorous blessings of liberal politics, skeptical philosophy, and free market economics”⁷³—Arendt frames totalitarianism as the *eradication* of politics. Totalitarianism threatens freedom precisely because the state⁷⁴ destroys the public realm in which freedom can become manifest. Liberalism’s concept of freedom therefore does not protect us from totalitarian destruction of the political. In fact, Arendt writes, liberalism, “name notwithstanding, has done its share to *banish the notion of liberty from the political realm.*”⁷⁵

⁷¹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo de Greiff (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 248.

⁷² Arendt, BPF, 155.

⁷³ Canovan, “Arendt’s Theory of Totalitarianism,” 26.

⁷⁴ In Arendt’s view, the state is not equivalent with the political.

⁷⁵ Arendt, BPF, 155. Emphasis mine.

The liberal notion of freedom arose from what we could think of as a long, misguided attempt on the part of all humans to exercise freedom. Its first step is what Arendt sees as an innate and legitimate “wish to emancipate [ourselves] from life’s necessity.”⁷⁶ Here, Arendt recognizes that we are directed toward freedom and innately associate freedom with liberation from necessity; that is, we know that we can’t be free while solely motivated by the futile constraints of life itself. But in an all-too-easy tit-for-tat logic, this desire has historically led some people to dominate others. Because they were “dominated by the necessities of life,” it seemed that “they could win their freedom only through the domination of those whom they subjected to necessity by force.”⁷⁷

But it would be remiss to call the dominator (or the ruler of any kind) “free” on account of his domination (or rulership). For one thing, one can never *permanently* satisfy his own needs and thereby be fully free from necessity, even by dominating others. One needs to eat and drink every day, to put it in the most basic terms. However, by arranging things so that others will take care of the extraction and accumulation of his necessary materials, providing a surplus of such materials and even a profit, and by ensuring that structures are in place that prevent others from taking them away, the dominator has assured that these needs will be satisfied for him. By

⁷⁶ Arendt, OR, 104. “All rulership has its original and its most legitimate source in man’s wish to emancipate himself from life’s necessity, and men achieved such liberation by means of violence, by forcing others to bear the burden of life for them. This was the core of slavery, and it is only the rise of technology, and not the rise of modern political ideas as such, which has refuted the old and terrible truth that only violence and rule over others could make some men free.”

⁷⁷ Arendt, HC, 84. In this passage, Arendt neither explicitly condemns or condones this drive to dominate, painting it as a harsh reality stemming from the human drive toward freedom. Though she isn’t justifying enslavement and exploitation of this kind as *right*, she does indicate that this truly was the only way the ancients could achieve the status of freedom. Only technological advancements that allow us to fulfill our own needs of our own accord, she notes, have made the status of freedom possible without the direct domination of others. Of course, we could argue that technological advancements have not taken that freedom away, merely systematized the exploitation that occurs to get us the products we need and hidden it from our eyes. If mastery of necessity is a precondition for freedom, the freedom of some often comes at the expense of others. This is a disturbing insight we will have to grapple with.

forcing the weaker to provide for his survival, the dominator “masters necessity”; he makes it easier to meet the demands of life itself. But this drive to rule others is still motivated *by* necessity—we rule others purely because we want them to provide us what we need. In doing so, we have not surpassed the constraints of life itself. The dominator has not become free by virtue of his domination. But he has established the precondition for freedom. “In order to be free,” Arendt writes, “man must have liberated himself from the necessities of life. But the status of freedom did not follow automatically upon the act of liberation.”⁷⁸

We moderns tend to think that freedom can be granted by liberation because we understand freedom what Epictetus understood as an inner feeling which stems from “living as one wishes,” known in more modern terms as the pursuit of pleasure.⁷⁹ It appears that one who lives as he wishes has transcended the demands of necessity, acting not because of what he *needs* to do, but because of what he chooses according to his own liking. But the pursuit of pleasure and the demands of necessity have more of a kinship than modern liberals realize. Arendt follows Kant in suggesting that so long as we are driven by the mere hedonistic⁸⁰ pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, we are not free, because we are subject to desires and motives which we did not choose.

When an individual is subject to the demands of necessity or external compulsion, all of his activities are bound up in a never-ending process of satisfying his needs. Pursuing pleasure, understood hedonistically, is likewise a *process*: one can never permanently “be happy,” so if

⁷⁸ Arendt, BPF, 148. To be clear, this does not mean that liberation from external compulsion is not an important condition for freedom—Arendt stresses that a slave cannot be free. But mere liberation from domination is not by itself enough to constitute freedom.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸⁰ I am referring here to a hedonistic or utilitarian pursuit of pleasure, not to the pursuit of “higher” forms of meaningfulness, which Arendt thinks can only be found with others. Hopefully, it will become clear why she thinks these “higher” activities are free, while pursuit of survival and pleasure are on the same level as conditioned by the life process and thus not free.

pleasure is one's only goal, his life ends up being a never-ending repetition of the same activities that only ever temporarily satisfy his desire, until he dies. It thus appears futile, and the pattern of his life is not so different than that of a field laborer's. The pursuit of pleasure is thus just as process-oriented as the pursuit of the fulfillment of necessity. Pursuing pleasure in fact becomes another form of labor, and if we mistake this for freedom, it inhibits our discovery of work and action.

Arendt thus argues that when politics is concerned primarily with liberation from domination, it devolves into a Hobbesian search for collective self-satisfaction in which freedom is understood as free pursuit of pleasure. The end of politics becomes "the guarantee of security."⁸¹ The vision of freedom that liberalism offers is that once we are all secure, we can individually pursue what we want. That is, liberalism promises us freedom of choice in a context within which our choices are protected and a multiplicity of options is (theoretically) ensured. The assurance that freedom allows us to live as we want reduces freedom to a limited freedom of choice wherein one "arbitrates and decides between two given things" according to a predetermined motive.⁸² In theory, we could override the hedonistic motive, choosing to live out our own definition of meaningful lives in such a regime. We have the individual option to pursue ends beyond the satisfaction of our own desires and pleasures through activities such as raising a family, being in love, learning about the universe, forming community, sharing pain, making something beautiful, or worshipping God. Certainly, we as subjects of liberal regimes do cherish these activities, but they do not give us the kind of meaningfulness that Arendt thinks was once the core of human life. The problem, for Arendt, is that protecting this freedom of choice requires a sacrifice of the public freedom which, to her, is much *more* meaningful. Because

⁸¹ Ibid., 149.

⁸² Ibid., 151.

politics becomes devoted to private interests, we are deprived of the public realm that would allow us to experience this freedom of participation in public life in the first place. So, not knowing what we're missing out on, we end up pursuing private ends that are based on necessity or pleasure. We become like Nietzsche's "last man": self-obsessed, resigned to the futility of pursuing our own pleasure, and uninspired to bring anything new, daring, or unexpected into the world.⁸³

Trying to conceive of freedom as liberation from necessity not only results in actual impossibility, but in a great metaphysical conundrum. We have been discussing "necessity" in terms of the demands that the life process puts upon individuals, but a second use of the term, arising out of the modern discussion of freedom in terms of free will, has to do with freedom as opposed to determinism. In this sense, freedom is opposed to necessity because if one's actions are completely determined by a causal chain of events, one is obviously not free. This has led modern philosophers to focus discussions of freedom on the question of the existence of a free will. This question, Arendt says, seems to "force the mind into dilemmas of logical impossibility so that, depending on which horn of the dilemma you are holding onto, it becomes as impossible to conceive of freedom or its opposite as it is to realize the notion of a square circle."⁸⁴ Arendt attributes this confusion to the contradiction between the principle of causality and the reality that "in all practical and especially in political matters we hold human freedom to be a self-evident truth."⁸⁵ That is, we all experience apparent freedom every day. Every time we make a choice and feel like we could have chosen differently, we are acting under the implicit

⁸³ Arendt doesn't explicitly draw this comparison to Nietzsche's last man, but as she was deeply influenced by Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, it was likely lurking in the background of her analysis.

⁸⁴ Arendt, BPF, 143.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

understanding that we did in fact have the freedom to choose. But if a chain of causal events in our brains determines our every move, this perception would be an illusion. It would thus seem that freedom would have to come from some invisible, immaterial faculty of the human mind which stands outside the causal chain of events.

Arendt calls this the search for the “sovereign will,” and views this search as fruitless. The drive to this search stems from a modern, apolitical understanding of freedom as an individual experience. The existence of such a will seems to require the existence of some metaphysical entity which cannot be proven to exist, and thus means that “freedom turns out to be a mirage the moment psychology looks into what is supposedly its innermost domain.”⁸⁶

The “mirage” arises because “the moment we reflect upon an act which was undertaken under the assumption of our being a free agent, it seems to come under the sway of two kinds of causality, of the causality of inner motivation on one hand and of the causal principles which rules the outer world on the other.”⁸⁷ The search for a sovereign will is based on a misunderstanding of freedom as self-sovereignty, even though according to its own logic, in order to be truly sovereign one would have to be able to exert control over the causal principles that rule the world. That is, even if we somehow determined that our inner motivations did not follow from a causal chain of neurologic events, one could never fully assert that the *consequences* of whatever action this motivation prompted would be what the actor intended. Not only are our motives shaped by causal necessity, but so are their impacts on the real world. Thus, the forces of necessity not only determine what our aims are, but also determine the feasibility of their realization.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 144.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

This is especially obvious when we take the discussion of freedom out of the individual mind and into the political context: no one is free to determine the consequences of actions that will impact other people, who will respond to these actions in accordance with their own motives and aims. If it is true that one would have to know all of the consequences of their actions in order to be “free,” then to be free, they would have to become either tyrants or gods, controlling the motivations of the masses utterly and completely. Thus, Arendt does not view the “sovereign will” as a solution to the problem of freedom. Even if the sovereign will could be “discovered” and proven, it would only show that freedom exists in motives, but it could never assert sovereignty on a political scale to assert that the aims of the action will be fulfilled. Nor should it: “If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.”⁸⁸ This means that we should not even be looking for freedom in the reflective capacity of the human mind, where it might as well be subject to determination. Rather, we should look for freedom in the world of human affairs, in which we experience freedom in concert with others, and cannot help but orient ourselves in everyday experience under the assumptions of freedom and responsibility.⁸⁹

As Ilya Winham puts it, Arendt took the theoretical lessons of what freedom could *not* be that she had imbibed from the discussions of Kant, Nietzsche, and the existentialists, and moved toward the discussions of civic republicans to understand what freedom *was*.⁹⁰ “What she sought to articulate,” Winham argues, “was a philosophical concept of freedom that would be true to the elementary political experience of freedom in which freedom is experienced in intercourse with others.”⁹¹ Arendt’s concept of freedom is not a matter of the will, but of the will’s fusion with

⁸⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 143.

⁹⁰ Ilya Winham, “Rereading Arendt’s ‘What is Freedom?’: Freedom as a Phenomenon of Political Virtuosity,” in *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 59 no. 131: 84-106. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42705243>

⁹¹ Ibid., 87.

action⁹²: “political freedom,” she writes, “consists in being able to do what one ought to will” rather than being able to will outside the determined forces of necessity.⁹³

For Arendt, the elementary experience of freedom is not to be found in the sovereignty of motives or aims, but rather in action that is “inspired by a principle.”⁹⁴ A principle is not the same as an inner motivation; rather it is something like honor, glory, love of equality, virtue, distinction, or excellence, which is “not bound to a particular person or group” but rather “inspires from without” and “becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself.”⁹⁵ Arendt explains that “this is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act,” but that insofar as action is understood purely in terms of motives and aims, it is indeed determined. Thus, “action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend [these motives and aims].”⁹⁶

This understanding of freedom has unsurprisingly been met with a great deal of confusion, resistance, and dismissal. As Winham points out, many scholars have interpreted Arendt’s discussion of “inspiring principles” and “transcendence” of motives and aims to mean that any action that manifests a principle is free, so long as that principle stems from outside of one’s inner psychology.⁹⁷ These scholars read Arendt as saying that you are free when transcending your individual psychology to adhere to some normative principle that you did not even choose.⁹⁸ This definition of freedom is so idiosyncratic that most scholars simply ignore it

⁹² Ibid., 84.

⁹³ Arendt, BPF, 161.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 152.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 151.

⁹⁷ Winham, “Rereading Arendt’s ‘What is Freedom?’,” 96.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

as an embarrassment to the integrity of the rest of Arendt's work.⁹⁹ Hanna Pitkin, for example, sympathizes with Arendt's desire to get away from thinking of action in utilitarian and causal terms. But she criticizes Arendt's definition of freedom as transcendence of motives and aims, writing that "action connected to nothing that precedes or follows it seems pointless and arbitrary."¹⁰⁰

While those scholars' objections should be taken seriously, it's worth considering that Arendt meant something by "action inspired by a principle" that is not readily understood. I agree with Winham that although Arendt herself was anything but lucid about this, it is improbable that she meant to imply that action is free whenever and only when it is inspired by any principle without relation to the actor's inner psychological motive. This would a) render the content of the action meaningless and b) locate freedom in the abstract, rather than an individual's experience in a political context. Besides, Arendt made it a point to write that "freedom *or its opposite* appears in the world whenever such principles are actualized."¹⁰¹ This statement is still ambiguous, but it seems to indicate that Arendt did not *equate* freedom with action inspired by a principle. Freedom could, however, be *found* in action that is inspired by a principle. Let us unpack what that could mean.

Winham's interpretation of the above sentence emphasizes that freedom is only a question of importance when principles are *actualized*, that is, in action rather than in thought. You can attempt to understand the concept of virtue in the abstract, and you can debate about the motives and aims of virtuous action all you want. But if you don't ever see or commit virtuous action, your understanding of virtue politically meaningless. This does not mean that thoughts

⁹⁹ Ibid., 95.

¹⁰⁰ Hanna Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," 275.

¹⁰¹ Arendt, BPF, 152. Emphasis added by Winham, "Rereading Arendt's 'What is Freedom?,'" 97.

are automatically unfree, whereas any “actual” event is automatically free. Rather, principles “inspire” action on a different level than either motives or aims (hence Arendt’s use of the term “transcendence”). Arendt later partially amended her use of the term “inspiring principle”: an inspiring principle is “something that becomes an example for later.”¹⁰² The notion of an inspiring principle has something to do with the potential for the action to be remembered and to inspire future action. That means that action must take place in a context in which others can see it and understand the principle which is manifested in it. While this seems an unfamiliar and contentious criteria for defining freedom, it may make more sense in light of another aspect of Arendt’s concept of freedom: freedom consists in being able to bring something new, something unexpected, even “miraculous” into the world.

Even while she refrains from putting faith in any sort of metaphysical entity that proclaims to transcend the determined forces of necessity, Arendt insists that we experience freedom when we act in a way that creates something unknown even to ourselves. In this way, the action transcends both our motive and intended outcome in acting. Freedom is thus understood as actualization of the human faculty “to call something into being which did not exist before,”¹⁰³ that is, something which even the doer did not necessarily intend or expect.

The human faculty to begin something new is a fact inherent in the condition of natality. Notably, this capability by itself does *not* depend on having a political context. Arendt acknowledges that the Stoics and individualists are right about one thing: we can retreat into our minds and feel free to think our own thoughts even while subject to external coercion. That in itself is an act of creation, importantly so. But it is also subject to “automatic processes” in

¹⁰² Winham, “Rereading Arendt’s ‘What is Freedom?’,” 100. Quoting Arendt, 1973, “Remarks at the American Society of Christian Ethics,” *Hannah Arendt Papers* (Washington, DC: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 1973.)

¹⁰³ Arendt, BPF, 151.

natural life which we cannot control, and which in fact control *us* by constraining our possible field of action and determining our motives and aims even when we feel as though they are under our control.¹⁰⁴

Action in public is no different than private thoughts in this sense. But within this constrained field of possibilities, action consistently *appears* in the world as something new, undetermined, and unexpected. Arendt puts a great deal of weight on the fact that we can produce something that appears to others to be freely brought forth, even if it can be analyzed *ex post facto* as subject to the forces of determinism. The only way action can transcend its determined motives and aims is insofar as it is experienced by both the doer and the observers as spontaneous. While humans are born with the *potential* for freedom, freedom can only become actualized in a political context. Beginning something new might be experienced as a spontaneous act of the agent, but for it to truly be a beginning *of something* and not just a flash in the dark, it requires other people to carry out whatever had been started.¹⁰⁵ Freedom is a “worldly, tangible reality” only when the “sheer capacity to begin” is able to come forth in a common space in the world.¹⁰⁶ While we can begin something new independently of others, we need others to make it meaningful. Freedom can only simultaneously be understood as inspired by a principle and as bringing something new into the world if we also understand that freedom can only be felt in public.

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Arendt argues that public freedom is manifest when we bring things into the world that appear to be spontaneously brought forth and have the potential become permanently influential.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 168.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 166.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 169.

Only in these kinds of actions can certain “principles” be fully manifest and understood. All of these things may also be explained by a deterministic metaphysical viewpoint, but we do not have to experience them that way. If we attempt to understand action amongst others as subject to pre-defined behavioral rules, we disregard the power of its spontaneous appearance. Our worst mistake would be to create a political context that in fact *does* determine our action with behavioral rules, which exactly what totalitarianism accomplishes.¹⁰⁷

Arendt's favorite example of this space of free action is, of course, the *polis*. The *polis*, she argues, “is based upon the principle of equality and knows no differentiation between rulers and ruled.”¹⁰⁸ The Greeks, she writes elsewhere, “held that no one can be free except among his peers.”¹⁰⁹ Arendt derives these conclusions not through examining ancient philosophical writings, which generally did not pay much attention to freedom, but rather through looking at the political arrangement of the *polis* itself: only those who had the “status” of free men were able to enter it. Yet this “status” did not permanently ensure their experience of freedom: they were only considered free insofar as they *did* enter the polis and act within it.¹¹⁰

Due to the modern corruption of the integrity of the public realm, Arendt believes that the public realm as a space of freedom has been lost. Modern actors still can and do experience freedom in this positive, political sense. It's just that we tend to misunderstand the source of this

¹⁰⁷ Arendt, BPF, 165. Totalitarianism, in her view, was paradoxically a completely novel political phenomenon whose chief feature was the drive to eradicate individual novel action, precisely by making everyone behave the same. Thus, when Arendt writes that “if men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce,” the extension of this sentence is that men must renounce sovereignty in favor of plurality, which recognizes the unassailable fact that “not man but men live on the earth.”

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁰⁹ Arendt, OR, 21.

¹¹⁰ Arendt, HC, 30-31. It is important to note that this is likely to strike us as problematic because, as Arendt admits, “this equality of the political realm has very little in common with our concept of equality . . . it presupposed the existence of ‘unequals’ who, as a matter of fact, were always the majority of a population in a city-state” (HC, 32.) In other words, freedom was a luxury reserved for the few who had the material means to master necessity, which of course depended on their ability to dominate others.

experience. Arendt pointed to many examples in the modern age in which men acted together bring something truly novel into the world. Arendt's examples include the deliberations of Hungarian workers' councils, the Russian Soviets of 1905 and 1917, the French revolutionary councils, and, most notably, the American revolution.¹¹¹ Importantly, most of these experiences occurred in the processes of revolution, but none survived the revolution they brought into being.¹¹²

The leaders of the American revolution may have been partially inspired by civic republican ideals, but they were fighting primarily for an incomplete, liberal conception of freedom: liberation of the colonies from the external constraint of British rule. To do so, however, they had to engage in the public business: fighting for liberation thus led them to the experience of freedom in Arendt's sense. While the Founding Fathers experienced true, public freedom, they mistook the end goal of liberation from domination for freedom itself, and thus failed to protect and uphold that public freedom in the institutions they established after the revolution had been won. In other words, they failed to recognize that the most important freedom they could protect was the freedom to engage in the sort of political action of which they themselves were partaking. If freedom can only be experienced in action, it remains an open doubt whether it is possible to enshrine freedom in any institution. For now, we can recognize that liberal institutions that promise freedom in the form of allowing individuals to provide for their own necessity without giving them a space to actualize freedom for the sake of a politics that goes beyond life itself are doomed to shove freedom into a corner.

Our mistaken view of freedom has had a self-reinforcing consequence for politics: it relegates politics to the sphere of life itself, to concern with things that, Arendt points out, are

¹¹¹ Arendt, OR.

¹¹² Winham, "Rereading Hannah Arendt's 'What is Freedom?,'" 85.

essentially futile. We have subsumed politics into the futility of individual struggle for survival and called the protection of our pursuit of happiness within it “freedom.” In reality, politics that is constrained by the demands of the satisfaction of needs provides little space for freedom. What we need is a politics that allows action to flourish in the public realm.

III. The Public Realm, Action, and Earthly Immortality

In the public realm Arendt envisions, “freedom is a worldly reality, tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which are talked about, remembered, and turned into stories before they are finally incorporated into the great storybook of human history.”¹¹³ As we have just discussed, the public realm enables freedom precisely *because* it enables narratives to develop and be remembered. Because action consists in individuals’ spontaneous response to one another *as* individuals, it is the pathway to what Arendt calls “self-disclosure,” which is how one beings to both feel his own reality. Arendt attributes this feeling to Dante, in a quote that she says “defies translation,” but translates as such: “In every action what is primarily intended by the doer ... is the disclosure of his own image... Nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self.”¹¹⁴ The public realm of the *polis*, Arendt says, was reserved for individuality; it was the only place where “men could show who they really and interchangeably were.”¹¹⁵

And it is extremely important to Arendt that people have a space to show who they are, because we cannot, in her view, know who we are on our own, let alone control it: “Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story.”¹¹⁶ Arendt calls the public relationship of self to others an “objective” relationship, though always in quotation marks. This choice could indicate that she is using the word as a placeholder; we all want to have an “objective” sense of ourselves in that we want to feel that we are real and our relationship to the world is real, not just

¹¹³ Arendt, BPF, 154-155.

¹¹⁴ Arendt, HC, 175; quoting Dante’s *De Monarchia*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

a perception cooked up by our own minds. This public “self-disclosure” should not be confused with processes of self-identification or “discovering” of one’s identity, which could happen just as well through private introspection. While relating to one another in public does not affirm our objectivity, it does at least give us a plurality of subjective perceptions that we can trust will see us for who we are. Having a community of others to observe, respond to, and remember our action’s will not necessarily help us understand our identities. But the promise that this narrative is being created will help us feel that our actions are real and meaningful. This is contingent upon two characteristics of the public realm: 1) its plurality and 2) its endurance in a common world.

What makes the public realm public is that “everything that appears in [it] can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity.”¹¹⁷ This “everybody” cannot be substituted by “anybody”; that is, it is of the utmost importance that the public realm isn’t filled with copies of well-behaving “individuals.” To Arendt, the public realm is embedded in the human condition of plurality, and “being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position.”¹¹⁸

In private life, the opportunity to be seen and heard is limited, because you will be among others who are at least somewhat like you—who share your heritage, culture, traditions, even share your looks, your values, your hobbies, your memories and experiences and connections to certain places. We need to be among others unlike ourselves in order to situate and differentiate ourselves and derive some concept of how we relate to the body politic. This plurality requires diversity, to be sure, but it goes beyond the emphasis of contemporary identity politics on diverse racial, gender, and socioeconomic categories. It’s not the category into which a person fits that

¹¹⁷ Arendt, HC, 50.

¹¹⁸ Arendt, HC, 57.

matters so much as their being a unique individual. Their life experience that may very well be shaped by their categorical attributes, but it cannot be determined entirely by them.

It may seem like Arendt is writing off the value of private life. After all, don't we often refer to intimate relationships as constituting who we are and defining of our sense of meaning in life? For Arendt, private relationships do not provide the worldly reality which can translate into the "worldly immortality" necessary for a transcendence of futility. Private, intimate emotions may be more intense, but they will never feel as *real* as public action.¹¹⁹ Arendt supports this (somewhat confounding) claim with the example of bodily pain, which is the most intense experience we know of and also the "least communicable."¹²⁰ Arendt doesn't deny that intimate relationships give us deep pleasure. But love consumes two people entirely in one another—it is thus is worldless, because it isn't mediated by something that is shared by all. However sweet this kind of passion may be, it must "lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance."¹²¹ For Arendt, it is exactly because intimate relationships offer a specifically private sweetness that they shouldn't become the standard of one's identity or self as presented in public. The intimate can be "rich and manifold," but it needs to be hidden in order to maintain that character.¹²²

Arendt traces the modern "love of intimacy" and retreat into the self to the Romantics' desire to rebel "not against the oppression of the state but against society's unbearable perversion of the human heart."¹²³ By that, she means its "leveling" conformism, society's demand that its

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 51.

¹²¹ Ibid., 50.

¹²² Ibid., 72.

¹²³ Ibid., 39.

members act as though they were members of a family “which has one opinion and interest,”¹²⁴ and conventions which “equate the individual with his rank within the social framework.”¹²⁵ In other words, it is society (the infiltration of private matters into the public), not politics (the properly separated realm for political action), that makes us want to retreat into private relationships and find ourselves in the “intimacy of the human heart.”¹²⁶ We have already disrupted the integrity of the public realm as a space for self-disclosure, and so seeking deep relationships in private seems to be the best thing available. If we were able to enter politics as such, uncorrupted by society, we would find an opportunity for self-disclosure greater and more meaningful than any found in private relationship—or so Arendt alleges.

Arendt’s assertion that one can only disclose oneself in public means that we must rely on others’ judgments of how we *appear* in order to confirm our own reality. While this may be disturbing to our desire for sovereign self-determination, Arendt goes so far to say that you *are* your appearance, for political purposes: “For us, appearance—something that is seen and heard by others as well as ourselves—constitutes reality.”¹²⁷ Perhaps because of a feeling that this talk of “appearances” reduces political reality to superficiality, some theorists to write off this statement: Dietz, for example, attributes Arendt’s conflation of appearance and reality to the fact that she saw what happened when people are forced not to appear, forced into total hiding due to the threat of total extermination.¹²⁸ Dietz writes that “the grand, optimistic illusion of the space of appearance offers a new beginning to the sufferers and survivors of a trauma that is still very much with us.”¹²⁹ But I do not think the public realm as the “space of appearances” is meant to

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 41.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 50.

¹²⁸ Mary Dietz, “Arendt and the Holocaust,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 86-109.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 102.

merely be an illusion or a trauma-healing myth. The public as a space of appearances is essential to its integrity.

For Arendt, it makes no sense to try to understand political life as containing anything “deeper” than appearances. Arendt doesn’t categorically rule out the possibility that there exists a “deeper,” more private “core” or “essential” self, prior to social and human conditioning (the kind of self that is commonly posited as a metaphysical entity). But she asserts that if this self exists, it has no significance whatsoever in the world of human beings. We could easily intuit the same conclusion: as far as other people are concerned, you are who you appear to be. Of course, their conception of you may be influenced by a variety of complicated sociocultural factors, and certain individuals may have radically different conceptions of other individuals. But the fact remains that if you have a “being” underlying your appearance that is different or more fundamental than your appearance, no one (including you) will ever know that “being” itself. Furthermore, whatever inner experience you have of yourself dies with you. It is others’ memories of you that will remain.¹³⁰

Action not only transcends futility by virtue of its reality-confirming embeddedness in the human condition of plurality, but also because action is “worldly,” that is, because it depends upon us inhabiting a common world of things which separate us from and relate us to one another. In other words, once the reality of one’s actions is established, it will give meaning to human action by giving them some degree of permanence. It is this “transcendence into a potential earthly immortality” that makes politics possible.¹³¹ For the Greeks, the polis was “their

¹³⁰ Arendt saw the Romantics and their followers as at best skirting around, and at worst failing to understand, this essential part of what it is to be human: your deep “core self” is an individual experience; retreating into it denies the reality of the self that you put out into the world. (Of course, we may seem to have reason in the modern age to resent the “self-image” we put into the world and thus overvalue our individual experience of ourselves.)

¹³¹ Arendt, HC, 55.

guarantee against the futility of individual life.”¹³² The activities of the *polis* “possessed an enduring quality of their own because they create their own remembrance.”¹³³ The public realm ensures that any action has the potential of some degree of permanence, of its effects and remembrance at least outlasting its temporal duration and even the individual actor’s lifespan.

Arendt’s concern for worldly immortality has been interpreted (I would argue misinterpreted) as an odd assertion that we must deny the facts of mortality and vainly strive to commit “great deeds” that will be remembered. As Pitkin writes, “Unable to face their mortality and physical vulnerability, the men [Arendt] describes strive endlessly to be superhuman and, realizing that they cannot achieve that goal, require endless reassurance from the others in their anxious delusion.”¹³⁴ Pitkin asks the question that many of us are probably wondering: “Why should I care—and care so much—about whether my name and deeds will be remembered after I am dead and gone?”¹³⁵ That is, isn’t it just vain and futile to seek “immortality?” And given that humanity will (likely) not survive forever, isn’t striving for earthly immortality just as futile as trying to enjoy your life here on earth? Why are public actions any less futile than private emotions or material accumulation?

Admittedly, Arendt does sometimes write as though she is re-invoking the Greek hero’s striving for great deeds. But her deeper point is a truly important affirmation of the important belief that the common world will outlast our individual lives. The philosopher Samuel Scheffler summarizes his work on this question in an essay published in the New York Times’ column *The Stone*.¹³⁶ In it, he proclaims that everyone shares a “mundane,” secular version of belief in the

¹³² Ibid., 56.

¹³³ Ibid., 208.

¹³⁴ Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Private and Public,” 25.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹³⁶ Samuel Scheffler, “The Importance of the Afterlife. Seriously.,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2013, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/21/the-importance-of-the-afterlife-seriously/>

afterlife: “Although we know that humanity won’t exist forever, most of us take it for granted that the human race will survive, at least for a while, after we ourselves are gone.”¹³⁷ Scheffler uses a thought experiment to discuss how, even though we take this shared belief for granted, it gives purpose to our lives: say you know you would live a long life and die in your sleep, but found out that the earth would be destroyed 30 days after your death. How would that affect the way you live? Scheffler points out that most of us would be profoundly disturbed by this knowledge, and that many of the activities that we dedicate ourselves toward would cease to seem very meaningful. For example, you were a cancer researcher trying to find a cure, that activity would cease to seem useful; likewise, if you were an artist, your works might still inspire pleasure in your contemporaries, but you would probably find it disappointing to know that they would not last.¹³⁸ Scheffler points out that this is not because of private concern for our loved ones: “The knowledge that we and everyone we know and love will someday die does not cause most of us to lose confidence in the value of our daily activities. But the knowledge that no new people would come into existence would make many of those things seem pointless.”¹³⁹

The point is that we already construct our lives with the hope in mind that some of our activities will create an impact that outlasts our own death, partially because some of our moral beliefs direct our work toward the benefit of posterity, but also partially because we as individuals “pursue our goals and seek to realize our values within a framework of belief that assumes an ongoing humanity.”¹⁴⁰ Whether or not Scheffler was drawing on Arendt, his formulation is, I believe, is what Arendt refers to as the “authentic concern with immortality.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Arendt, HC, 55.

It is not reducible to the vain pursuit of everlasting and self-inflating fame, but rather it is a natural product of the condition of human plurality and the world: we want our actions to be remembered or influential in some way, because humanity ceases to make much sense unless one thinks of oneself as part of the continuance of it. Arendt would also find it telling that, in the twenty-first century, Scheffler points this out as a belief we don't commonly think about, as if urging us to recognize what she views as the essential political truth. She might find some comfort in knowing that (at least some) humans still do seem to hold this desire in mind when framing their actions, but she would bemoan the fact that that regard for one's place in the world after one has died has been lost as a conscious aspiration.

In 1968, Arendt wrote a series of essays intended to illuminate the lives of men and women of action. In the preface to *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt elucidates her views on the role of "exemplary individuals" in history. We can be inspired by people of the past who continued to act in the face of a bleak future. She writes, "Eyes so used to darkness as ours will hardly be able to tell whether their light was the light of a candle or that of a blazing sun. But such objective evaluation seems to me a matter of secondary importance which can be safely left to posterity."¹⁴² In other words, Arendt is not primarily concerned with the ultimate value or impact, the "objective evaluation" of an individual on the long string of future human generations (although her wording here does indicate that this question is to some degree important). It's not necessarily the degree to which these men would be *satisfied* with the immortality of their name or the recognized impacts of their deeds, but the degree to which we as their successors can learn from their specific lives of action and use them as examples in our own. So long as the integrity of the public realm and the world holds steadfast, the actor can (and

¹⁴² Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), originally published in 1955, x.

must) hold examples in mind, and implicitly, the promise people in the future could learn from him. Action in the public realm imbues our lives with meaning by satisfying our yearning for a relationship to humanity.

IV. The Social and Political in the Modern World

It goes without saying that Arendt would not support “absolute, uncontested rule,”¹⁴³ or tyranny, as the proper and free form of governance. What is more surprising is that Arendt does not necessarily see rule by the many (democracy), rule by the few (oligarchy), or rule by the “nobody” of organizational structures (bureaucracy) as by themselves free ways of governance. Arendt intends instead to recover an ancient concept of “isonomy,” which meant that no one either ruled anyone else nor was ruled by anyone else.¹⁴⁴

In stark contrast to the modern assertion that everyone was born equal, the ancients viewed *the polis* as necessary to make them equal.¹⁴⁵ “To be free,” Arendt writes, “meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed.”¹⁴⁶ It meant both “not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled.”¹⁴⁷ In the realm of the political, things would be decided by individuals acting, talking, and indeed disagreeing together, wherein no one individual holds any permanent higher power over another. But even for now, given Arendt’s framework of freedom (in which not dominating and not being dominated can make one free) we can see how any introduction of ruling into politics would disrupt its place as a free realm. Electoral “politics” are thus nothing but contests to determine who will rule. Isonomy, on the other hand, demands a radical political equality, in which all voices that enter the political realm are respected and invited to be part of the conversation and no person has any greater permanent power than any other. It also demands that these voices be

¹⁴³ Arendt, HC, 28.

¹⁴⁴ Arendt, OR, 20.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Arendt, HC, 33.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 32.

involved in decision-making through a process of substantive deliberative argument. It is admittedly difficult to imagine this in practice, and the modern situation presents particular challenges. Something like the *polis* seems impossible to achieve, for several reasons.

The first, most obvious problem that we would have to overcome is population size. The average polis had only a few thousand citizens, and only three had over 20,000.¹⁴⁸ We live in political communities of hundreds of millions of people. There is no hope, for most, of becoming known in the population, making oneself stand out in public, or having any sort of space in which all could appear at once as equals. Arendt was aware that as population size increased, so did the likelihood that the social—the prevalence of common interest instead of political individuality—would come to dominate the public realm.¹⁴⁹

The modern solution to the infeasibility of *polis* life has been representative democracy. But for Arendt is a pale and sad substitute for the real thing. Arendt views representative democracy as depriving people of a true public space that gives them the opportunity to do the activities of “expressing, discussing, and deciding.”¹⁵⁰ Even the representatives, who are assigned by popular vote (for the most part) to do the expressing and deciding are supposed to relate the opinion of their constituents, and thus are either “glorified messenger boys” or “hired experts” for the people, who do not wish to attend to public business.¹⁵¹ Representative democracy in Arendt’s view gives people the illusion that they are participating while in reality depriving them of a public space.

The idea of direct deliberative democracy seems unfeasible in mass society. But Arendt does not think that public participation in a direct, political sense is totally ruled out, even within

¹⁴⁸ HDK Kitto, *The Greeks* (New York: Penguin Books, 1951), 20.

¹⁴⁹ Arendt, HC, 43.

¹⁵⁰ Arendt, OR, 227.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

a nation-state. She pays particular attention to the council system, a phenomenon which Arendt thinks played a decisive role in both the American and French revolutions. Spontaneous informal organizations of disparate people who were able to unite around a common understanding of the world while maintaining their individuality and avoiding succumbing to either ideology or self-interest, all of the councils Arendt points to seem to be only hopeful glimmers in a sea of darkness. None of them outlasted the revolutions which they helped put into effect. Arendt seems to give us but a small “if-only” hope that the revolutionary council systems could have been established as institutions. If the Founding Fathers had not been persuaded that mass republics were possible—if we’d listened to Jefferson—the council system could have been preserved in the form of town hall meetings. The American Revolution may have provided institutions that prevented politics from trampling on the rights of (most of) mankind—which is an accomplishment to be sure—but in searching for stable institutions, it failed to institutionalize the very spirit that made men believe in the importance of the rights of mankind.¹⁵²

Arendt is not arguing that we can or should make America look like ancient Athens, and yet her concept of politics seems to require such a small community. She leaves plenty of lingering questions about how her politics can be realized in modern times. She presents us with a compelling notion of how freedom may be achieved in a polis which governs by isonomic relationships of individuals in a flourishing public realm. But there is a tension between that and the (apparent lack of) possibility of achieving such a realm in the modern world.

¹⁵² It’s worth noting that other examples of small-scale political organization have appeared during and after Arendt’s lifetime. The Zapatistas, for example, are a group of indigenous peasants in southern Mexico who declared themselves autonomous from the state and organized a system of rotating, non-representative public participation centered around gatherings in which each community member is viewed as an equal participant. While Arendt might have admired the Zapatistas’ internal political workings, she would likely have disdained the role that ideology and propaganda play in their external communications. The same is likely the case with other anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal movements which are lauded by the left as demonstrated examples of anarchistic political potential.

One implication of Arendt's concept of politics is that it cannot be merely about arranging and administering resources for the sake of order. Arendt believes that modern politics has indeed begun to constitute what she calls "public organization of the life process,"¹⁵³ wherein the political questions are primarily about distributing necessary resources in the fairest, but more importantly the most efficient, way. The Greeks, by contrast, viewed the polis as "a very special and freely chosen form of political organization and by no means just any form of action necessary to keep men together in an orderly fashion."¹⁵⁴ It's not that they were ignorant of the need to organize the resources necessary for human life in some way, or ignorant of the need for some institutional structures to prevent human relationships from devolving into total chaos, but the purpose of the *polis* was fulfillment of the human potential, not control of the population.¹⁵⁵ Administrative questions—how to build a necessary public building, the process of collecting taxes, etc.—would of course have to be addressed within the *polis*, but they weren't viewed as truly political concerns.

This also means that politics cannot be for the sake of material wealth and its proper distribution. Obviously in a world where the question of "political economy" is often our primary concern in politics, this is an extremely controversial assessment—but one that, in a certain sense, could appeal to the sensibilities of the anti-capitalist left.¹⁵⁶ Capitalism is essentially dynamic, driving both the property-owning and laboring classes to its seemingly

¹⁵³ Arendt., HC, 46.

¹⁵⁴ Arendt, HC, 13.

¹⁵⁵ Arendt, HC, 13.

¹⁵⁶ Asked about her views on capitalism, Arendt once replied, "I do not share Karl Marx's great love of capitalism." (Hill, *Hannah Arendt and the Recovery of the Public World*, 357.) She explained that she viewed capitalism as a harmful and exploitative development, and did not see it as a stage in progressing towards the inevitable utopia that Marx predicted.

endless expansion.¹⁵⁷ It is this obsession with endless growth that worries Arendt most of all—it signifies to her that the insatiable nature of the life process has overtaken public life, and that the private interests of the materially wealthy few have overwhelmed the priorities of the bureaucratic apparatus that expands and distributes the wealth of a nation.

While politics often claims to be concerned with the “common good,” Arendt notes that in historical reality, liberal politics has only provided for common material interests.¹⁵⁸ We can’t seem to agree on what the “common good” would be beyond a few negative commands, and so we fall back upon the only common interest everyone is presumed to have: increasing their wealth and material prosperity. The liberal state’s promise to defend the common good has thus only truly protected the existing material wealth of the few, and therefore reified both material inequality and inequality of citizenship.¹⁵⁹ Arendt quotes the historian RWK Hinton: “‘The commonwealth’ largely existed for the common *wealth*.”¹⁶⁰ When the term “commonwealth” came about in a feudal system, it was construed as “the duty of kings to rule in the interests of their subjects’ property.”¹⁶¹ This alone perpetuated material inequality because it aligned government interests with those of the wealthy landowners. Arendt believes that the much later neoliberal premise that protecting the “private appropriation of wealth will suffice to guard individual liberties”¹⁶² is merely a further development in this alignment of politics with wealth and the wealthy. It hides behind the role we have assigned the state as protector of liberties, creating the illusion that the state will not interfere with private economic matters. But those who are economically deprived are in fact threatened by “society, which distributes the jobs and

¹⁵⁷ Arendt, HC, 87-90.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 68. Quoting RWK Hinton, “Was Charles I A Tyrant?,” *Review of Politics*, Vol. XVIII (January 1956).

¹⁶¹ Arendt, HC, 68.

¹⁶² Ibid.

determines the share of individual appropriation.”¹⁶³ Thus, when the state protects and promotes unregulated private appropriation of wealth, it backfires on the economically disadvantaged: it establishes the protected right of the wealthy elite to appropriate far more than their share. The deprivation that the poor experience as a consequence binds them to the demands of necessity and therefore deprives them of freedom.

But Arendt emphatically rejects the Marxist claim that the solution to this problem is for the state to take a more active role in distributing wealth equally, especially when this expansion of the state requires that the oppressed class revolt against the state. Arendt harbors a conviction that poverty puts men under the “absolute dictate of necessity.”¹⁶⁴ On the one hand, this indicates that she recognizes the struggle of poverty; on the other hand, it implies a rather elitist assumption that because the poor struggle for survival, they *cannot* be concerned with anything but survival. According to Arendt, because the poor are concerned exclusively with necessity, they are unworthy of political power, since they would be unable to use it for anything but the fulfillment of the wants and needs of their bodies which would only continue to consume politics with the biological life process at the expense of freedom.¹⁶⁵ Arendt indeed believes that, in championing a revolutionary ideology which persuaded the masses that poverty was a “result of violence and violation rather than of scarcity,” Marx failed to realize the full implications of his own prognosis that “freedom and poverty were incompatible.”¹⁶⁶ That is, Marx was correct to

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Arendt, OR, 51. As Arendt puts it, “poverty is more than deprivation, it is a state of constant want and acute misery whose ignominy consists in its dehumanizing force” and makes the free man act like a slave. Arendt does present a ready solution to the problem that the poor are faced with: they are not able to be free due to their poverty, yet they apparently are not ready to make themselves free through redistributing wealth via political forces, violent or not.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 50-51.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 53.

say that their poverty violated freedom. But the impoverished classes are unable to make themselves *free* merely by alleviating themselves from poverty.¹⁶⁷

According to Arendt, laborers cannot enter the public sphere peacefully, either, because their drive for necessity would corrupt it and direct toward fulfilling their own private concerns.¹⁶⁸ And as soon as politics becomes concerned about the activities of the life process, it loses its status as the space for freedom.¹⁶⁹ “It seems that for Arendt,” Pitkin writes, “because political action cannot solve economic problems, and because misery can become active only in destructive ways, it is best for the poor and the laborers to be kept out of the public sphere.”¹⁷⁰ This seems to put the poor in a tragic Catch-22, since they are neither able to fight for the kind of systematic changes that it would take to address their own needs. Pitkin points out, “On this account, the exclusion of everything merely necessary or useful from political life means simply the exclusion of the exploited by their exploiters.”¹⁷¹ This is a scathing critique of Arendt: her conception of freedom is shallow, elitist, and destructive if it amounts to exploitation of the many for the sake of freedom of the few. Should we jump to the dismaying conclusion that Arendt had “contempt for the lives of the poor and working classes—in her own words, ‘the vast majority of humankind?’”¹⁷²

I don’t believe that Arendt was a shallow defender of freedom for the few elites. Arendt consistently insisted that everyone is capable of thinking,¹⁷³ and that everyone is capable of

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 50.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 60-63. Here, Arendt seems to be assuming that laborers would not be able to put aside their concern for necessity at the end of the workday—she seems to conflate the laboring activity with being trapped in the laboring attitude.

¹⁶⁹ Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Private and Public,” 269.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 270.

¹⁷² Ibid., 237. Quoting Arendt, HC, 199.

¹⁷³ Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*.

acting in the public realm.¹⁷⁴ Thus, it's reasonable to suspect that Arendt envisioned the possibility a public realm open to all. Nonetheless, she certainly did have a troubling blind spot about the socioeconomic sidelining that her concept of freedom seemed to demand. She showed little concern with up these unanswered questions: how could excluded classes gain access to the public realm without corrupting it with necessity? And how the debate in the public realm could have any substance without concerning itself with necessity? Arendt didn't take particular attachment to the idea that everyone *should* be given access to the public realm as a condition for its legitimacy.

Moreover, Arendt's insistence that politics cannot be concerned with the distribution of wealth does seem to rule out the possibility that politics can promote economic equality and correct for economic inequality. We are left with a paradox: it seems that the only way that politics can be meaningful is if it is liberated from necessity and made to be concerned with things beyond the life process. But the activities of politics seem to require concern with satisfying the needs of the life process. My assessment is that Arendt failed to reconcile this paradox, but that the seeds to do so lie within her thought.

In November 1972, Arendt was invited to be a "guest of honor" at a conference about her work held in Toronto. Not one to parade about, feeling passively honored, she attended on the condition that she be able to participate in the conference herself. It became an opportunity for friends and colleagues to publicly probe her about her work. During one of the discussions, several of them pressed Arendt on perhaps the most controversial matter she had put forth (besides, of course, the controversy surrounding Eichmann in Jerusalem): her insistence that

¹⁷⁴ Arendt, HC.

there must be a rigid distinction between public and private realms. Arendt's friend Mary McCarthy brought up the matter, pointing out that Arendt's insistence on the distinction seemed to mysteriously obscure what the *content* of political matters might be.

I have always asked myself 'What is somebody supposed to do on the public stage, in the public space, if he does not concern himself with the social? That is, what's left?... I am left with war and speeches. But the speeches can't be just speeches. They have to be speeches about something.'¹⁷⁵

The exchange that followed seems to me to expose a serious gap in Arendt's concept of politics. According to her own explanation, politics would be unable to address what seem to be pressing issues of our time. Arendt's preliminary answer to McCarthy is entirely vague and unsatisfactory: "Life changes constantly, and things are constantly there that want to be talked about... So what becomes public at every given period seems to me utterly different."¹⁷⁶ Further pressed, she gave a reluctant concession with a problematic caveat: it may be true that there are political and social *aspects* to nearly every issue, but they are nonetheless separate questions. Arendt argued that, "With every one of these questions there is a double face." She implied that we should be able to distinguish easily between the two faces (political and social/economic/private). As for the social aspects, "there are things where the right measures can be figured out. These things can really be administered and are not then subject to public debate ... in the sphere Engels called the administration of things."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Mary McCarthy, quoted in Hill, *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 315.

¹⁷⁶ Arendt, quoted in Hill, *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 316.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.

Arendt then gave the example of the “housing problem”: the recognition that neighborhoods in the U.S. were starkly divided along racial lines, and that many suffered from inadequate housing and the denial of the opportunity to pursue it. “There shouldn’t be any debate about the question that everybody should have decent housing,” Arendt said.¹⁷⁸ For her, that question wasn’t up for debate. It was clearly a matter of necessity, a question of how many square feet every human being needs, “something we can figure out” without having to bat the issue around in a public forum. “But,” Arendt explained, “the question of whether this adequate housing means integration or not is certainly a political question.”¹⁷⁹

Christopher Holman points out that Arendt’s response here seems to reaffirm a certain trust in bureaucratic administration that she elsewhere emphatically rejects.¹⁸⁰ Thus, ironically, Arendt’s insistence on the integrity of politics as separate from social matters seems to rely on the existence of extensive administrative apparatuses which in which “social engineers ... instrumentally solve problems through the practical application of principles of technical authority.”¹⁸¹ This seems at best inconsistent with the rest of her thought. At worst, it’s impractical and unviable. It’s difficult to imagine that a group of citizens from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and ideological perspectives in the U.S. in the 1970s could gather around a town-hall-type-meeting and debate the question of whether racial integration was required to give everyone adequate housing without serious conflict about whether housing was ever a right guaranteed by this country at all. Arendt might have been confident that fair housing was a necessity, but public debate would in fact be *required* in order for others to come to that

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 318.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Christopher Holman, “Dialectics and Distinction: Reconsidering Hannah Arendt’s Critique of Marx,” in *Contemporary Political Theory* 10 no. 3 (2011): 332-353. <https://doi.org/10.1057/cpt.2010.11>

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 340.

opinion. It's also hard to imagine such a meeting not provoking serious tensions and divisions along identity-based perspectives. Yet Arendt insists that we must parse out which aspects of these matters are social and can be easily answered versus which aspects are political and can only be answered by debate. It does not seem to me that there is an obvious consensus on which matters are fit for public debate. If we disagree on that criteria, where are we to turn other than to some higher authority or to more public debate?

Arendt's blind spot about the necessity of including social issues in political equality encompasses more than socioeconomic class. Feminists have also long pointed out that Arendt is guilty of a gender blindness which seems to reify ancient relegation of women to the private sphere. Despite being one of the few female philosophers of her time and probably the most prolific female political philosopher of the 20th century, Arendt never identified with the feminist movement: the slogan "the personal is political" was to her an egregious assault on the integrity of the public realm. As Dietz points out, her work on the importance of immortality and agonal striving toward excellence in the public realm was "indebted to a [ancient Greek] culture of masculinity and hero worship."¹⁸² Arendt mentions women only twice in *The Human Condition*—once to state vaguely that they performed "different tasks" than men did in the Greek household, another time to explain that they were hidden away because their lives were devoted to bodily functions and necessity.¹⁸³ Dietz thus points out that Arendt introduces a "harmful gender binary between action/public/men and labor/private/women."¹⁸⁴

Arendt runs into similar problems when confronting the issue of race relations in the United States. She is well-known and often-criticized for an essay she wrote entitled "Reflections

¹⁸² Mary Dietz, "Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics," in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 231.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

on Little Rock,” in which she argued against desegregation of schools in the South. While she proclaimed that as a Jew she had “sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed and underprivileged people,”¹⁸⁵ she viewed desegregation efforts as a mistaken prioritization of equality of opportunity and social equality over what seemed to her to be a much more important equality of citizenship.¹⁸⁶ Likewise, she was an outspoken critic of opening elite college admissions to black students, as well as deeply suspicious of violence on the left during the 1968 student revolutions in Paris. These instances in which Arendt really did view social justice movements as harmful to the public realm make her out to be a biased hypocrite who reifies praise of traditional Western masculinity in politics and denigrates women, racial minorities, and the poor. It is especially concerning since she herself was a woman, a former refugee, and a persecuted minority.

I do not wish to defend Arendt’s views on this front. Part of the role of social resistance movements has been to challenge what we think of as necessary for certain marginalized groups of people. Take, for example, the question of whether a transgender woman needs her health insurance to cover gender-confirming surgery for the sake of her mental health. The question of whether this is *necessary* isn’t so cut-and-dry, because arriving at the conclusion that she does might require undoing one’s assumptions about transgender people, as well as incorporating ideas of mental health and identity confirmation into our conception of what is “necessary” for a human being. Similarly, the standard of how many square feet each person requires to live comfortably is one that has changed with time, the growth of material wealth, and technological development. Standards of living are not only a question of basic need, but of what we feel people *deserve* according to the perceived needs of our particular context.

¹⁸⁵ Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 309.

¹⁸⁶ Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003).

While I do think these problems constitute genuine holes in Arendt's framework of thought, I don't think they doom her attempt to re-instill esteem for the public realm as a space of freedom. Part of the reason Arendt was so concerned about separating the public realm from life process was that she had witnessed totalitarian regimes swallow of public life and in doing so evaporate all significance from human life. In focusing on this entirely valid concern, however, she failed to fully elucidate the connections between necessity and meaningfulness. While the purpose of politics may be to bestow significance on human life, it also cannot do so without satisfying needs. Arendt certainly recognized that the satisfaction of needs was a precondition for freedom. But she views this concern as taking place entirely within the confines of private life. If one—or one group—tried to harness politics to help him master necessity, that would be a corruption of the public realm for private, essentially selfish purposes. Concern for necessity in and of itself is not a political concern, because politics is not *just* about fulfilling what we want, but shaping our sense of ourselves in relationship to our peers. Is it possible, though, that concern for necessity can and should be *part* of this relational aspect of politics?

Pitkin attempts to amend the feminist stance with an Arendtian twist: perhaps the personal can *be made* political. "Far from excluding the social question as unworthy of political life, we need to make it political in order to render it amenable to human action and direction"¹⁸⁷ The question, in other words, is how politics can take social questions into account without becoming overwhelmed with necessity. We can't just bring matters of necessity into the public sphere, we must *make* them political by putting them into terms beyond pure utilitarian calculation of needs and wants. This means we need to figure out several questions that Arendt

¹⁸⁷ Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public," 281

never quite addressed: 1) how to deliberate in terms that are negotiable by public standards—that is, how disparate perspectives can come together without devolving into ideological partition and fighting 2) how the “alienated and apathetic” oppressed can enter politics without seething with resentment¹⁸⁸ and 3) how we can understand ourselves “simultaneously as both private and public beings.”¹⁸⁹

Here I will limit my scope to the third question, which I believe could be addressed within Arendt’s own framework. Arendt affirmed that it is necessary for all people to labor, work, and act in order to live a fully human life. Labor, after all, is the activity in which both the joy and sorrow of the life process is felt, and work creates the common world in which the activities of the public realm can place. Labor is not a scourge on the human situation; rather, the problem comes when action becomes understood solely in the terms of laboring.

But contrary to what Arendt sometimes seemed to imply, this does not mean humanity must be divided into laborers, workers, actors, and thinkers. We could re-read Arendt as implying that everyone should experience labor and work themselves, in order to have the understanding of the content of life that is necessary for action and thinking. In the same vein, Peter Steinberger argues that while Arendt and others understand public and private as a “boundary problem,” it would be better to think of the two not as “separate realms of endeavor but different ways of being in the [same] world.”¹⁹⁰ It’s not the entrance of laborers or of the consideration of necessity into the public realm that we should worry about, but rather the attitude that one is a laborer solely concerned with the life process, the regarding of oneself and others as a certain limited facet of what human beings are capable of, “because he regards

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 282

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Peter Steinberger, “Public and Private,” *Political Studies* 47 no. 2 (1999): 292- 313, 292.

himself as driven [by necessity], incapable of action.”¹⁹¹ Unfortunately, we are at the apex of an age in which that attitude threatens to become ubiquitous.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 276

PART THREE
LABORING SOCIETY, DEVOURING SOCIETY: ARENDT AND DIGITAL MEDIA
TECHNOLOGY

It might be easy to think we're at the forefront of an Arendtian transformation of politics that began in the early 2000s and has yet to be fully realized. Social media seems to have the potential to enable an unprecedented mass public realm, a virtual *agora* in which almost everyone—not just the few thousand wealthiest men of the city—can appear to each other, communicate instantaneously across multiple platforms, and bring new creations into a space in which they could theoretically be seen by all. But while Arendt might have been intrigued by the potential of this technological development, I believe she would be horrified by the reality of what we've done with it. While social media may constitute a new type of open space, it is far from the public realm Arendt so esteemed, and relationships between people within it tend to be far from what she viewed as free action. There is a reason social media is called *social* media: it was structured and created expressly for the purpose of defining and displaying social status.¹⁹² Far from lauding it as a new public space for expressing, debating, and deciding, Arendt would see social media as an extreme consequence of the “laboring animal” entering the public realm: the outcome is that there can be “only private activities displayed in the open.”¹⁹³ Social media threatens and perhaps destroys the integrity of the already-feeble modern public realm.

¹⁹² Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook, for instance, as an online “hot or not” forum originally called “FaceMash,” in which images of two female students would be shown side-by-side and ranked according to physical attractiveness—an endeavor which almost got Zuckerberg expelled from Harvard for violating privacy and copyright laws. Nonetheless, Zuckerberg went on to create a website displaying profiles of students at Ivy League schools (this time they got to choose whether to do so) and eventually opened to anyone with access to the internet. (Sarah Phillips, “A Brief History of Facebook,” *The Guardian*, July 2007.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2007/jul/25/media.newmedia>. Accessed April 16, 2019.)

¹⁹³ Arendt, HC, 134.

The following section discusses the rise of social media platforms¹⁹⁴ and the physical technologies that make these platforms accessible to us constantly (smartphones, laptops, etc.). I will refer to these collectively as “digital media technologies.” I will also draw on the work of two other contemporary theorists, Byung-Chul Han and Francois Cusset, to help introduce tools and terminology that complements and challenges Arendt’s work. Han and Cusset both discuss digital media technology from perspectives shaped by critical theory, biopolitics, and post-structuralism. While they are both adept cultural critics, they tend to create a totalizing view of modern technology. Cusset argues that “there is in fact no dimension of life that can escape the supposedly benevolent grasp of the market.”¹⁹⁵ Han agrees with Arendt that we are under the illusion of increasing freedom while freedom is actually disappearing, but he seems to be determined to prove that we cannot be free.¹⁹⁶ Bringing Arendt’s perspective into their contemporary conversation thus offers a “light in the dark,” because while she foresaw and feared many of the changes in the human condition that Cusset and Han observed, she spends most of her work trying to re-instill our understanding of how the human condition could change.

Plenty of other scholars have used Arendt’s thought to shed light on contemporary events, but they have focused on what she would say about specific political events such as the Arab Spring, the refugee crisis, or the Iraq war.¹⁹⁷ Perhaps because Arendt herself didn’t focus on analyzing technological change as such (although I argue there is a sufficient framework within her work to do so), “Arendtians” haven’t turned much attention toward the rise of mass digital

¹⁹⁴ Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and any website or app that incorporates a “social networking” aspect could all be a part of this, but I will primarily analyze Facebook as the most widely influential and popular online space.

¹⁹⁵ Francois Cusset, *How the World Swung to the Right: Fifty Years of Counterrevolutions*, trans. Noura Wedell (Cambridge, MA: Seimotext(e), 2018), 86.

¹⁹⁶ Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (New York: Verso Books, 2017).

¹⁹⁷ See Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*; Richard Bernstein, *Why Read Arendt Now?* (New York: Polity, 2018).

technology when considering her relevance today. But her thinking has much to offer us if we hope to once again “think what we are doing.”

It’s no overstatement to say, as Cusset does, that the technological transformation we are living through is a “mutation equivalent to the appearance of the popular press at the end of the nineteenth century, or to the emergence of the printing press in the sixteenth century, or even to the invention of writing in the Sumerian world.”¹⁹⁸ Like anything else that is put into the world, our new digital media technologies “condition” us in an Arendtian sense: they alter our hierarchical view of, and our ability to distinguish between, various human activities, and they change the way we think of these activities as constituting ourselves.

When these digital technologies are praised, it is primarily because they make life easier. But Arendt was extremely wary of ease becoming a goal of human life. She viewed the modern praise of ease as part of a process which removes the burdens of labor without redirecting or moving beyond labor’s goal of insatiable consumption. As she wrote, “The human condition is such that pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself ... for mortals, the ‘easy life of the gods’ would be a lifeless life.”¹⁹⁹ Ease is enticing, but dangerous—only a society that did not know the meaning of activities beyond labor would seek and praise easy life as its goal.

Due to technological advances, we continue to consume more, while the need for labor decreases. But we never stop seeing the goal of consuming apart from the framework of the activity of laboring, which rules out understanding an individual’s activity beyond necessity or usefulness of certain activities for the provision of life. Digital media technologies thus seem to

¹⁹⁸ Cusset, *How the World Swung to the Right*, 65.

¹⁹⁹ Arendt, HC, 120.

constitute a further development in the transformation of our society into a “society of laborers without labor.”²⁰⁰ We cannot help but think of our lives in the terms of the laboring process, all while largely being deprived of both the pain and joy of labor itself.

The ancients, according to Arendt, occupied the other extreme. For them, laboring was not even viewed as sufficient to constitute a human life, much less a free one, since it is “chiefly devoted to keeping one’s self alive.”²⁰¹ Labor meant the utmost “enslavement by necessity,”²⁰² because it was—and is— “imprisoned in the eternal recurrence of the life process to which it was tied.”²⁰³ This is because labor, unlike work, is not directed toward lasting products but rather the extraction of things necessary for survival; it is an endless process which, like the life process, can never be permanently satisfied, because its only aim is the continuance of the process itself. Now, Arendt does not deny that there is a certain “blessing” to be found in the way that the laboring activity connects an individual with the process of life. There is an important simplicity in the activities of producing and consuming goods for one’s survival. The difficulty and effort of labor allow the laborer to “feel” life’s impact with intensity, and some amount of labor is thus essential for every individual to develop a “trust in the reality of life.”²⁰⁴ But while its blessings might be sweet, the happiness found in this activity is “dangerous,” because labor produces nothing lasting. The laborer must continue producing in order to have enough to consume, and anything—disease, poverty, exhaustion, bad climate—can throw that cycle out of balance and thus disrupt the happiness of labor. The character of labor itself thus rules out understanding an individual’s activity beyond necessity or usefulness of certain activities for the provision of life.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 5.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 12.

²⁰² Ibid., 83.

²⁰³ Ibid., 46.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 120.

In antiquity, labor was thus seen as necessary insofar as it enabled life, but futile insofar as it *only* enabled life. So, the laboring classes (slaves, who labored in the fields and the household, and women, who labored in childbearing and raising) were “banished” to the private realm.

According to Arendt, it was Plato who initiated the first “reversal” of the hierarchy of human activities as such, placing philosophy above politics and relegating politics to the same unfree status of work and labor.²⁰⁵ As Arendt writes, in the *Republic*, “The whole utopian reorganization of polis life is not only directed by the superior insight of the philosopher but has no aim other than to make possible the philosopher’s way of life.”²⁰⁶ As Plato’s influence began to take hold, especially with the adaptation of so-called Platonic ideals into early Christian theology, “Action was now reckoned among the necessities of earthly life, so that contemplation ... was left as the only truly free way of life.”²⁰⁷ Meanwhile, whereas the ancients had viewed life itself as a necessary but not free or meaningful component of the human condition, Christianity elevated life to “the position of immortality”: instead of striving for worldly immortality in a public sphere, men were supposed to strive for eternal life on an individual level.²⁰⁸ “Christian emphasis on the sacredness of life tended to level out the ancient distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa*; it tended to view labor, work, and action as equally subject to the necessity of present life.”²⁰⁹ Early Christianity thus viewed contemplation via quiet, individual introspection as the only earthly path to the “free” realm of life (the eternal). Yet at the same time, present life (including the activities of labor, work, and action) was viewed

²⁰⁵ Arendt’s reading of Plato’s *Republic* (which is controversial) is that all of politics must literally be directed in service of the philosopher-kings: the kings exist not so much for the sake of the well-being of the polis, but rather the polis is constructed as such in order to enable the philosopher-kings to philosophize. She reads Aristotle as following the ancient polis’s love of political action rather than Plato’s alleged love of contemplation—apparently, the full impact Platonic reversal had not yet taken hold.

²⁰⁶ Arendt, HC, 14.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 314-15.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 316.

as a sacred thing to be eternally preserved in the idea of an afterlife. There was a tension building: Christianity supposedly prioritized the unearthly eternal, but the idea of that eternal began to look more and more like an extension of life itself into eternity.

This tension led to a “second reversal” in the hierarchy of human activities. Emerging modern scientific worldviews, emphasizing active experimentation over contemplation as the standard for truth, resulted in an appraisal life itself (including the three, now less hierarchically distinct, categories of action, work, and labor) above the eternal.²¹⁰ Once Descartes’ doctrine of doubt took hold upon science, nothing could be trusted to *be* as it appeared, and instead of being discovered by quiet contemplation, the principles that guided the world had to be tested by experimentation. Whereas science had previously been a search for useless but eternal truth, it now became a “handmaiden of doing [and making].”²¹¹ Early modern thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke made a similar attempt to apply political philosophy to the same role.²¹² In the beginning of the modern age, *work* thus rose to the place formerly occupied by contemplation: man was a maker, a creator of things to be put into the world. Yet the modern esteem of *homo faber* was, curiously, followed by a more gradual, less dramatic third reversal: the elevation of laboring to the place formerly occupied by work.

Arendt believes the primary culprit in the destruction of *homo faber* was the introduction of the “principle of utility” into intellectual life. This indicated to Arendt that a radical “loss of values” had occurred—indeed a loss of the meaning of anything in the world for the sake of itself.²¹³ As a result, “individual life again became mortal”²¹⁴ ... “None of the higher capacities

²¹⁰ Ibid., 285.

²¹¹ Ibid., 292.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid., 308.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 320.

of man was any longer necessary to connect individual life with the life of the species; individual life became part of the life process, and to labor, to assure the continuity of one's own life and the life of his family, was all that was needed."²¹⁵ In the logic of the laborer, things are only viewed in terms of their utility in preserving bare life. The profound and stunning effect of this most recent reversal has been the "glorification of labor as the source of all values,"²¹⁶ which we see reified intellectually (in the work Adam Smith and John Locke just as well as in Karl Marx) and materially (in the language of modern economics in which "what is bought and sold in the labor market is not individual skill but 'labor power.'"²¹⁷ Marx intended to provide a platform to emancipate man *from* labor, but what followed was rather the emancipation *of* labor—labor had been freed from its confinement to the private realm and has since grown to overpower previously public, political spaces with the concerns of necessity and an ever-increasing process of expansion. And because labor is inevitably concerned with bare necessity, Arendt predicts darkly that "the modern age's emancipation of labor will not only fail to usher in an age of freedom for all but will result, on the contrary, in forcing all mankind for the first time under the yoke of necessity."²¹⁸

The modern laboring society's obsession with bare life has coincided with the development of new technology that allows those bare life needs to be satisfied. If one labors very little but produces much, one can consume not only the necessary amount but extra for the sake of enjoyment. The calculus of utility thus literally became a calculus of pleasure. Jeremy Bentham's propositions that society should maximize utility really meant that society should seek greater pleasure and less pain. The logic was the same as a laborer's logic, but the end effect

²¹⁵ Ibid., 321.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 85.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 90.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 130.

of it was not only survival but also “‘happiness,’ that is, the amount of pain and pleasure experienced in the production or in the consumption of things.”²¹⁹ Thus, being a laboring society is only one side of the coin: we are also a consumer society.²²⁰ In a laboring/consumer society at its most acute form, we are so wrapped up in futile pursuits that we cannot recognize their futility, and we are doomed to labor, seeking a hedonistic form of happiness that can never be permanently fulfilled.

We may just have edged ourselves closer to living out that dystopian nightmare. Indeed, Han speaks of an immanent “totalization of labor” in contemporary society, which is exemplified by the transformation of the process of production into immaterial things, or in other words, appearances in the digital world.²²¹ Whereas our desire to emancipate ourselves from necessity historically motivated some to dominate others, now, everyone dominates himself—we make ourselves labor not to produce necessary things for survival, but to advance our wealth, status, and happiness. As Han puts it, “Everyone is an auto-exploiting laborer in his or her own enterprise.”²²² A master who forced others to labor for him could at least free himself from labor, thus accomplishing what Arendt would call “mastery of necessity,” and what Han calls “ris[ing] above bare life.”²²³ We force ourselves to labor in pursuit of the never-fulfilled goals given to us by the grossest over-expansion of the process of bare life. Thus, we have begun to create “new needs,” to see the goals of material wealth and happiness not as added benefits to life, but as necessary things.²²⁴

²¹⁹ Ibid., 309.

²²⁰ Ibid., 126.

²²¹ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 6.

²²² Ibid., 5.

²²³ Ibid., 2.

²²⁴ Ibid., 7.

Arendt offers insight into the role digital media technologies have played in this totalization of labor. We could attempt to understand digital media technologies in their tangible sense or “thing-character,” insofar as they exist in the world of physical man-made objects. But this kind of understanding made more sense when most non-perishable man-made objects were static, their functions simple and direct. A chair, for example, is a place to sit, and it may have a certain character depending on its shape, color, material, size, and history. The conditioning factors of a smartphone—the current pinnacle of this technological change—have little to do with the phone’s physical characteristics. The potential impact of digital media technologies goes far beyond the fact that they are handheld devices carried close to the body, because their functions are multifaceted, ever-developing and almost limitless in potential. The smartphone, for example, combines functions that were previously essentially separate: it can be a book, a phone, a TV, a map, a photobook, a camera, a wallet, not to mention all of the applications that are continually being developed.

The primary function of the smartphone and all that comes with it, though, is as a technology of information and communication. Digital media technologies allow an unprecedented instantaneous display of information. Thus, not only are they conditioning us through their own thing-character, they have transformed our relationships to almost every other man-made thing in the world. They have changed the way companies advertise, the way we purchase and consume products, the way we situate ourselves in physical locations, the character of fame and the path to it, the way we display beauty, the requirements for productivity, and the way we express our feelings, preferences, and desires. Old technologies of information—books, a newspapers, encyclopedias, campaign posters—still exist as physical objects, but we have come to expect different functions from them due to their transposal to the digital sphere. The

organization of the digital sphere offers a “modular, lateral, and nonexhaustive approach to knowledge” operating by a “random connectivity that disrupts all fields of knowledge and their organization.”²²⁵ While digital media technologies may give us more access to information, they leave us in an infinite void of clicks, hyperlinks, and sources, distorting the intended meaning of the information. Information is no longer essentially connected to a certain physical thing: it can be pasted and shared anywhere in the digital haze and can “circulate independently, free from any and all context,” and the rate of its transmission tends to accelerate for arbitrary reasons.²²⁶

Arendt writes that “The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak.”²²⁷ The world of the past was constituted by things that human beings made to last—works of architecture, art, literature—that constitute a place in time and make it a space upon which people can leave a mark. The world serves the purpose of providing a platform in which we can relate to each other and separate ourselves from each other. But in mass society, things of the world have come to be viewed in terms of mere production and consumption. We are no longer able to view each other through the medium of the world. Arendt compares this experience to a “spiritualistic seance” in which people are gathered around a table, but the table has ceased to appear. Concretely, we have lost the ability to determine a meaning for the objects we interact with in the human world.

The entrance of digital media technology into the world of things thus threatens the integrity of that world of things. Arendt seemed to foresee this as a consequence of a society which could consume much more than it needed to labor: “things would appear and disappear daily and hourly in the life process of such a society would at best be *immaterial for the world*, if

²²⁵ Cusset, *How the World Swung to the Right*, 70-71

²²⁶ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 9.

²²⁷ Arendt, HC, 52.

the world and its thing-character could withstand the reckless dynamism of a wholly motorized life process at all.”²²⁸ On social media, while content technically never vanishes, its appearance in public is fleeting: statuses appear and disappear in a feed of information within minutes, trends no longer last more than a few days. The content of digital media is constantly changing, and we are obsessed with constantly producing content, as if caught in a desperate and futile effort to keep up. And because our attention is on the digital, we are all the more alienated from the actual objects we have created. Even in the 1960s, Arendt assessed our economy as a “waste economy”²²⁹: we feel compelled to “consume and devour” even the worldly things among us (houses and furniture and cars) as though they would spoil if we did not. The literal immateriality of the world today, the striking fact that information and ideas have turned into something to be instantly consumed only to disappear forever, would strike Arendt as disaster. She saw the common world of things that will outlast man’s life as integral to creating a gathering space for the public realm. It becomes much more difficult to ensure relative permanence, to leave something in the world that will endure beyond our lifetimes, when the world has been transposed into a virtual space. And our abandonment of the world of things in favor of a digital non-world of non-things shapes the way we relate to each other, not least by shaping how we relate to ourselves.

I think Arendt would see most uses of social media as hopeless vanity: self-propagation wrapped up in the “futility of individual life.”²³⁰ Making the distinction between seeking the approval of others for our own self-propagation and achieving freedom found in “self-realization with others”²³¹ is admittedly tricky today. While perhaps pockets of the social media landscape

²²⁸ Ibid., 132.

²²⁹ Ibid., 134.

²³⁰ Ibid., 56.

²³¹ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 3.

offer the latter, both Han and Cusset point out a persistent theme of social media: it displays our relationships with each other as relationships of exchange value. Exchange value relationships are nothing new: as Arendt points out, it has been the case since the 18th century and earlier that “public admiration... is something to be used and consumed ... consumed by individual vanity.”²³² As soon as public admiration is conflated with monetary value, it means that individuals no longer feel they need “the public presence of others” in order for action to have reality and permanence; rather, they need others only for the essentially vain purpose of affirming themselves. Because this affirmation is based in the life process itself, public admiration becomes futile and is “daily consumed in ever greater quantities.”

Han and Cusset point out that the primary currency we are trading for in today’s economy of vain exchange is not even verbal praise but raw *attention*. Cusset calls attention “the most precious raw material of the global economy... it is what this economy is seeking to capture, much more so than natural resources, labor forces, or monetary capital.” Public affirmation is no longer won; rather, attention gets *collected*.²³³ Celebrities rise and fall in a sort of automatic and random way, through the dissimulation of links and algorithms. Han points out that we see this literally in the ubiquity and power of the “Like” button.²³⁴ On Facebook and Instagram, we voluntarily post information, photos, or opinions from our “private” lives, not knowing who will see it or what they will think of it, and wait for the “Likes,” little signals of affirmation, to confirm its worth—indeed *our* worth. Social media is a platform for vanity to fester and grow—for us to affirm our love for ourselves only through other peoples’ attention and approval. The Like button is addictive: when we see that someone has given us a signal of

²³² Arendt, HC, 56.

²³³ Cusset, *How the World Swung to the Right*, 78.

²³⁴ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 15.

approval, we want more—no matter that we know they may have passed our profile picture in two seconds and kept scrolling on, no matter that we can't think of a reason the thousands of Likes we exchange could add up to anything very meaningful. Even if we tell ourselves we don't take it seriously, most of us still pay attention to the amount of attention we get on social media. What about this new form of ever-calculated narcissism is so addictive to us?

Arendt might trace the source of our desire for this kind of vain, fleeting public affirmation to the phenomenon she calls the “lonely mass man” of modern bureaucracies.²³⁵ “mass” because he is subjected to the demands of normalizing behavioral rules that society has presented before him, and lonely because, due to his submission to these behavioral rules, he does not even know who he is enough to feel truly connected to either anyone else or the world of things men have created.²³⁶ He is “world-alienated” and also thoughtless, bound to “the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have become trivial and empty.”²³⁷ Arendt recognized this phenomenon even in her time, but it has only grown. The social destroys the integrity of both the public and private realms. At its worst, we cannot find refuge and connection with other humans in either the bold reality felt in public self-disclosure or the sweet and intimate relationships that occur in the now-vulnerable “shelter of the hearth.” Especially now, our private relationships are corrupted, because it seems that they must be put on public display. But even before social media, the lonely mass man was trapped in the isolation of his own world, the only apparent solution to bend himself to the expectations of society.

²³⁵ Arendt, HC, 259.

²³⁶ Arendt, HC, 257.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

In accordance with the political bending to the apparatus of ordering social functions, “society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.”²³⁸ To that end, the ideal of democracy has, according to Arendt, been ruined by the behavioral aspect of mass society. She notes that these societies are obsessed with the notion of “public opinion.” To Arendt, “public opinion is the death of opinions.”²³⁹ The very term “public opinion” denotes that there is a norm to which individuals are expected to bend themselves toward, to behave in a way which either reflects or does not reflect that pre-set rule, rather than think on their own. This is not truly an “opinion” at all. “Since opinions are formed and tested in a process of exchange of opinion against opinion,” Arendt explains, “their differences can be mediated only by passing them through the medium of a body of men, chosen for the purpose; these men, taken themselves, are not wise, and yet their common purpose is wisdom—wisdom under the conditions of the fallibility and frailty of the human mind”²⁴⁰ The Founding Fathers, fearing “tyranny of the majority,” implicitly understood the normalizing power of public opinion, which they held to threaten the public spirit.²⁴¹ Arendt thinks that fear has been realized: “the realm of the social has finally ... reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength.”²⁴² That is, “public opinion” is really a norm formed from a messy conglomerate of private concerns, and we obsess over opinion polls and electoral statistics at the expense of inspiring

²³⁸ Ibid., 38.

²³⁹ Arendt, HC, 220.

²⁴⁰ Arendt, HC, 219.

²⁴¹ James Madison, Federalist Paper No. 51. “[I]n the federal republic of the United States... all authority in it will be derived from and dependent on the society, the society itself will be broken into so many parts, interests, and classes of citizens, that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority.”

²⁴² Arendt, HC, 41.

meaningful debate between individuals, thereby suppressing their ability to even have those debates.

Though Arendt does not draw the connection explicitly here, the undertone of Arendt's critique of behavior is that mass societies are moving toward, or at least setting up, the same framework that allowed totalitarianism to emerge. Mary Dietz reads Arendt's emphasis on the importance of spontaneous individual action as an effort to steer politics away from the most destructive psychological force behind the death camps of Stalin and Hitler.²⁴³ The death camps, after all, were a space between life and death in which neither could be fully comprehended for what it was, and thus almost broke the normal understanding of a human life as marked by natality and mortality. The "extreme isolation" that the death camps forced upon interned people obliterated all "distinguishment of personality." The end result was "the reduction of human beings to the lowest possible denominator of 'identical reactions.'"²⁴⁴ It is because of her reflections on the conditions of the *vita activa* in the labor camps that Arendt "affirmed the existential superiority of action over labor and work"²⁴⁵: the death camps are the ultimate representation of the futility that human life can be reduced to when deprived of the opportunity to strive for earthly immortality.

Many theorists have attributed the appeal of a totalitarian regime to a supposed sense of community that comes from the sense of everyone commonly serving a greater purpose. This is obviously initially problematic because that purpose is the mass destruction of human life, but also because not even the operatives in totalitarianism experience true community. Arendt ascribes the appeal of totalitarianism not in terms of dedication to community, but like

²⁴³ Dietz, "Arendt and the Holocaust."

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 102. Quoting Arendt, OT, 447-457.

²⁴⁵ Dietz, "Arendt and the Holocaust," 99.

Eichmann, the self-serving ideal found in following orders, in adjusting oneself to a pre-set expectation and excelling. Certainly, totalitarian regimes employ rhetoric that imagines a great cause that will unite men. But their true weapon is a highly organized bureaucratic apparatus that isolates each individual to the point where they are incapable of thinking beyond their assigned role in the regime. Eichmann, for example, was not an acting individual but a behaving animal, and “whatever he does remains without significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to other people.”²⁴⁶ We can imagine that this feeling of non-significance would drive us to attempt to glean some feeling of significance from whatever source we can find. Of course, social media “likes” are no real solution, because their ability to bestow significance and recognition of another is hollow and shallow.

Social media and the Like button drive us to take this modern loneliness, which previously could only get us lost in a sea of mass men, and “optimize” ourselves.²⁴⁷ It drives us to behave in order to fit a norm. This form of behavior is more complex than the kind Arendt feared in the 1950s: she looked at the world and saw people succumbing to literal conformism, “one that exclude[d] spontaneous action or outstanding achievement,”²⁴⁸ a tendency that the Nazi death camps took to the absolute extreme. Now it is not so simple as unthinkingly seeking to appease designated authority. We seek to set ourselves apart as outstanding achievers, but we are inclined to measure our achievements not due to some transcendent value we might have, but by how much we are approved of and *liked*.

Both Cusset and Han understand behavior in a Foucaultian sense that is helpful to us here. Foucault pointed out, for example, that the sexual liberation movement *appeared* to remove

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 58

²⁴⁷ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 3.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 38.

oppressive rules that constricted our sexual behavior to “free” our unburdened, natural sexuality from its chains. But this “natural” and free sexuality was a myth. In reality, the sexual liberation movement only re-inscribed a norm to which our sexual practices are expected to ascribe. “The norm (which is difficult to escape) can be clearly stated: ‘Your life is not successful unless you have a satisfying and fulfilled sex life at twenty-five and at sixty-five.’”²⁴⁹ Today, the Internet appears to liberate our voices; it appears to give us a chance to express anything we want and thus free us from the norms that restricted creativity, individuality, uniqueness. But in reality, we are only subject to the normalization of the Like button. We may now be able to choose certain cultural communities, certain corners of the virtual world in which we feel that we can be affirmed apart from the dominant standards of state and mass culture. But regardless of the source, we are still driven by this search for affirmation.

Cusset calls this a “pragmatic paradox” due to an ideology in which we realize ourselves not in public action but in individual fulfillment. This ideology has been in the makings for decades, that the Internet has only unleashed and provoked. Cusset describes the effect of this ideology as such:

A double-bind of an extolled freedom and the obligation to prove it ... It’s a bit like those authoritarian theater instructors who demand spontaneity from their students. The success of social networks is mostly due the neoliberal obligation of a hyper-narcissistic mise-en-scene of the self and to the supposedly friendly generalized rivalry that underlies it.²⁵⁰

We make the *apparent* willing (not free) choice to display our behavior on a concentrated platform of behavior display in which others are similarly begging for approval. Social media presents others as unique, coming from different perspectives, but it creates the potential for all of these perspectives to be reduced to a general trend. On the one hand, social media allows us to

²⁴⁹ Cusset, *How the World Swung to the Right*, 93.

²⁵⁰ Cusset, *How the World Swung to the Right*, 96.

see the “different locations” and “innumerable perspectives” from which we meet one another, but on the other hand, it promotes the instrumentalization of these perspectives, an emphasis on diversity of categorical classifications rather than a diversity of a person’s whole narrative.

The even more terrifying novelty of social media is its potential for forces—corporations, individuals, the state—which seek to administer our behavior, to order us. As Han writes, “Big Data is a highly efficient psychopolitical instrument that makes it possible to achieve comprehensive knowledge of the dynamics of social communication.”²⁵¹ Companies and governments are now able to collect data on us and process it on a mass scale “for the sake of domination and control,” aiming for conditions in which they can influence us “on a pre-reflexive level.” Arendt feared so-called “behavioral sciences” not because they were true, but because they had the potential to become true. They “aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal.”²⁵² Now we have a technology that makes this a more exact and achievable goal.

According to Arendt, when we act freely, we are by definition grounded in the world and engaged with the people around us. Because we act in the common world, we transcend the futility of our individual lives and give our actions an immortal potential, feeling our own reality in disclosing ourselves. “Now,” Han writes, “norms of action are supposed to be subject to *negotiation* at every level: transcendence will yield to discourse *immanent to society itself*.”²⁵³ Even while the entire world is theoretically opened to us, our relationships of exchange value enclose us in our own worlds more than ever. On social media, we decide what we disclose according to motives and aims; our words and actions do not have the character of spontaneity in

²⁵¹ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 102.

²⁵² Arendt, HC, 45.

²⁵³ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 7.

the presence of others that would make them free. Algorithms then examine our predetermined self-disclosure and decide for us what we will see in response. They show us what we like, stories and memes and links that will confirm what we already believe.²⁵⁴

Han writes that digital media technologies have empowered neoliberal forces to “make citizens into consumers.” Politics is to them “a commodity or service they do not like,” he writes. “Today’s voters have no real interest in politics—in actively shaping the community. They possess neither the will nor the ability to participate in communal, political action.”²⁵⁵ The 2016 election and the rise of similar strands of right-wing populism across the globe revealed our inability to effectively deliberate. Constantly updating my Facebook page means that “my self affirmation will neither be political nor collective.”²⁵⁶ Even if I post a political opinion, I almost always do it from behind the isolation of my own screen (not physically with others). I almost always do so expecting likes, perhaps some comments, but never the same level of debate where we are forced to respond to each other by being engaged in the same physical space. Yet this space of private images in public had become the primary battleground for electoral politics. Just like the current President of the United States, when public “debate” occurs on social media platforms, it is narcissistic, self-glorifying, and reality-denying.

Han offers no solution to the dismal reality that politics has begun to reflect the worst of our private tendencies. Cusset’s proposed solution is to restore the possibility of conflict: the left needs to band together and engage in an agonal politics which can help them win. I think Arendt would depart from Cusset here. The problem will not be solved by merely using social media for

²⁵⁴ The infamous example is found in the Senate hearings of Mark Zuckerberg, in which Facebook was criticized for allowing illegal appropriation of private data and for doing nothing to limit the spread of fake news during of the 2016 election.

²⁵⁵ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 11.

²⁵⁶ Cusset, *How the World Swung to the Right*, 99.

different ideological goals. The problem is deeper than that: it epitomizes a laboring society's destruction of the public realm. It threatens freedom itself. Han recognizes this: "Psychic maladies such as depression and burnout express a profound crisis of freedom. They represent pathological signs that freedom is now switching over into manifold forms of compulsion."²⁵⁷ Han's view is that our unhappiness reveals that we are subjecting ourselves to "auto-exploitation" even while under the illusion of ever-increasing freedom.

Arendt would say, however, that even this *desire* for happiness and ease indicates that we have lost the meaning of freedom. We certainly have easier lives due to the improvement of technologies of labor, but that "has not eliminated compulsion from the laboring activity or the condition of being subject to need and necessity from human life."²⁵⁸ Rather, it has only obscured it:

This condition is no longer fully manifest and its lack of appearance has made it much more difficult to notice and remember. The danger here is obvious. Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity.²⁵⁹

The ease which these new technologies offer is elusive. Because they make fulfilling one's needs (and wants) easier, they shut off our natural "repugnance to futility," our desire for freedom beyond these needs and wants, and we become completely enwrapped in the process of fulfilling needs— "slaves to necessity" once again.

Labor and consumption are, after all, two sides of the same coin. Once we become a laboring society, and especially in the progressive development of the laboring society wherein less labor is required for more consumption, a hedonistic form of happiness becomes our main goal and the standard by which we measure our lives. As Arendt wrote, the "deep-rooted

²⁵⁷ Han, *Psychopolitics*, 2.

²⁵⁸ Arendt, HC, 121.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

trouble” of mass culture “is a universal unhappiness due on one side to the troubled balance between laboring and consumption and, on the other, to the persistent demands of the *animal laborans* to obtain a happiness which can be achieved only where life’s processes of exhaustion and regeneration, of pain and release from pain, strike a perfect balance.”²⁶⁰ We lack enough laboring to keep us contented, and contentment—a “universal demand for happiness” is the only thing we can see as our goal.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 134.

CONCLUSION

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and for worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by “credibility gaps” and “invisible government,” by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truths to meaningless triviality.²⁶¹

Arendt gave a dark assessment of the modern world, wherein work, action, and thought were rare and threatening to disappear altogether.²⁶² I have argued that digital media technologies upon which our lives are increasingly dependent have exacerbated the worst of Arendt’s fears. Arendt’s whole political phenomenological project may seem all for naught if it’s true that we don’t live in a society with an intact public realm. It’s difficult to be inspired to act freely in public when public participation often amounts to pursuit of vainglory and empty exhortations. It’s difficult to imagine restoring meaningfulness to politics when we can’t seem to appeal to anything beyond necessity and contentment other than trivial repetition of old truths. By Arendt’s own account, we are facing a world of darkness. Arendt knew and disdained the incipient forms of these problems, yet she still claimed to “love the world” fiercely. She must have believed there was something still worth loving.

Arendt began to speak of her *amor mundi*, her love of the world, after undergoing what she called a *cura posterior*, a period of personal healing after grappling with the realities of the war and the Holocaust.²⁶³ She understood love of the world as a love that could “unite self and

²⁶¹ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, viii.

²⁶² Arendt, HC, 324-325.

²⁶³ Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 261.

others.”²⁶⁴ It was a feeling that also prompted her to think more about the experience of thinking, which required being together with oneself.²⁶⁵ Her love of the world was not merely a recognition of the value of human creations, but a way of deepening the connection between the individual self and the realm of appearances. Love of the world first recognizes that each human being has the *potential* to think and act freely. One who loves the world then affirms and remembers those people who do think and act freely, embracing the human potential of those who could become “lights” in the darkness of our times.

And this is the true potential of understanding Arendt: her political phenomenology presents the sources of the discord in our world, but it does not demand that we are cynically reconciled to them. We may not and may never live in the *polis* of Arendt’s esteem, but we can still be moved to act for the sake of establishing freedom and meaning in our own lives. Once we know this, we can persist in the activities of creating, acting, thinking, and being in the world with others, despite the fact that our world is no longer set up to do so. Freedom and meaningfulness, for Arendt, are not dependent on a certain political structure but on the actions of individuals. In this way, attempting to build something new in politics also affirms our existential understanding of ourselves. We disclose who we are and experience freedom in the process of trying to implement the public realm and open it to all: directing ourselves towards politics also creates the conditions of remembrance and the experience of freedom. Thus, even in our world, acting and thinking are worth doing in themselves.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 327.

²⁶⁵ Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*.

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