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Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Political Action

Charlie Hartford

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Introduction

If there is one idea that will define both the work of Hannah Arendt and its legacy for future generations, it is her theory of political action. But both Arendt's theory and its legacy thus far have been anything but unambiguous; the following, then, is an attempt to clarify the phenomenon of action as presented in her work. The path I follow to this end, however, calls for some preliminary remarks. Much of this essay consists in an extended analysis of the concept of "worldhood" in the work of Arendt and of her erstwhile mentor, Martin Heidegger. Since the subject of this paper is action, a "practical" concern if there ever was one, such a lengthy discussion of an abstract, "theoretical" concept like "worldhood" might perhaps seem peculiar and out of place. Even more peculiar, perhaps, is the way this discussion is structured, with Arendt's conception of "world" appearing twice; first in the beginning, followed by a discussion of Heidegger's theory, and then concluding with a return to Arendt.

The second peculiarity, in my mind, is justified by the first. The fundamental premise of this essay is that Arendt's account of action cannot be fully understood without considering its phenomenological underpinnings – and moreover, that her account does not actually make very much sense absent such consideration. One might think that the proper way to proceed, then, would be to discuss the works I consider chronologically. But this would entail beginning with a protracted discussion of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which would be unacceptable for two reasons. Firstly, Heidegger's philosophy is notoriously complex and difficult to understand – let alone explain – both due to Heidegger's convoluted, jargon-ridden prose, and to the genuinely revolutionary and difficult ideas that he presents. Thus, to subject the reader to such a discussion would be unfair without giving him or her some indication in advance that such a lengthy philosophical digression is likely to be productive. The second reason for this somewhat peculiar structure is that in any phenomenological inquiry – and any inquiry into the work of Arendt and Heidegger, particularly into the phenomenon of action, is necessarily phenomenological – it is necessary that the *phenomenon*

to be investigated be made apparent at the outset of the inquiry, even in a provisional form, so that the analysis may be then directed towards the clarification of that phenomenon.

The structure of the paper, then, is as follows. In the first section, I begin with an account of action within the context of the *vita activa* as laid out by Arendt in *The Human Condition*. I then proceed to identify some of the more perplexing features of her account, and suggest that they are confounding enough to throw the coherency of what Arendt is saying into question. Taking my cue from Hanna Pitkin, I then argue that we can understand action as *activity informed by thinking*, by drawing upon Arendt's posthumously published work *The Life of the Mind*. This account, however, though illuminating with regard to some aspects of political action, will be shown to possess serious deficiencies in others. Thus, I will proceed in section two to explicate Heidegger's conception of "worldhood," and will demonstrate that Arendt's conception of "the world of appearances" in *The Life of the Mind* is essentially derivative of this account. I will then go on in section three to show that Arendt's conception of the "world" in *The Human Condition* is fundamentally a critique of Heidegger's account, and that far from being derivative, Arendt actually exposes major deficiencies in Heidegger's notion of worldhood. I will then conclude by giving an account of *action as taking responsibility for the world*, with the world understood as a space for action and freedom.

One final issue remains to be addressed. Though my preliminary account of action as thoughtful activity is, I believe, fundamentally correct, Arendt herself did not ascribe to this view – in fact, she argued fairly consistently that thought and action were diametrically opposed faculties. Though my intention in this paper is far from exposing some sort of "contradiction" in Arendt's thought – a ludicrous endeavor, I think, since it seems to presuppose Arendt's "thought" as a discrete, unchanging entity – this does raise the issue of what status, exactly, my work here holds in relation to hers. My answer is that I am interested in Arendt's account of action not with regard to her presentation, but to *what she presents*: the phenomenon of action. Because this phenomenon has been dealt with so insightfully by Arendt, there is no way any investigation of action could proceed

without engaging her account; any more than one could discuss the “will to power” – supposing one took it for a real phenomenon – without discussing Nietzsche (one could ignore Arendt’s entirely, but this would amount to either a pointless retreading of ground she had already covered, or a discussion of something fundamentally different than what she is talking about). But nonetheless, because I am not interested in what Arendt has to say as such, but rather in the underlying phenomenon, this essay will surely appear as something of a creative interpretation of Arendt’s account – particularly in the third section, where I present Arendt’s critique of Heidegger while at the same time critiquing some aspects of her position. In fact, the third section of this paper amounts to less a straightforward presentation of Arendt’s view than a sort of synthesis of Arendt’s account with Heidegger’s philosophy. Since Arendt herself was a frequent practitioner of such “creative” (some would say “violent”) interpretations, I do not think she would object to this. On the contrary, in her introduction to *The Human Condition* Margaret Canovan quotes Arendt as saying:

Each time you write something and you send it out into the world and it becomes public, obviously everybody is free to do with it as he pleases, and this is how it should be. I do not have any quarrel with this. You should not try to hold your hand now on whatever may happen to what you have been thinking for yourself. You should rather try to learn from what other people do with it.¹

All of which is to say that I have attempted to distinguish my exposition of Arendt’s account from my own thinking, and that the account of action I present in this essay is ultimately my own, as derivative and nugatory as it may be.

¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xx.

I. Action and the World of Appearances

What is the meaning of action in the work of Hannah Arendt? This is the fundamental question that will guide my thinking in this paper; but before I can attempt an answer, some clarification is in order. What does it “mean” to inquire into something’s meaning? Though I will return to this issue at various points in this essay, it seems worthwhile at this juncture to make a tentative point which I think will clarify the direction of what follows. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* provides three definitions of “meaning,” which for our purposes might be condensed into two. The first is “what is meant by a word, text, concept, or action,” which we might parse as “what something *is*.” The second is something’s “implied or explicit significance” or “important or worthwhile quality,” which we might say is the *point* of a thing (the meaning of life, for example). On closer inspection, then, there are really two questions being posed here: What is action? And what is its point?

The fact that the first of these questions, at least, seems somewhat straightforward should not mislead us into thinking that it possesses a straightforward answer. What Walter Kaufmann once wrote of Nietzsche could easily be said for Arendt; that though “we find that practically every sentence and every page of his writings” less troublesome “than the involved and technical periods of Kant, Hegel and even Schopenhauer... it is perhaps easier to form an opinion of the general meaning of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*” than to do the same for any of Nietzsche’s works, despite the fact that “in Nietzsche’s books the individual sentences seem clear enough.”² As Margret Canovan notes, *The Human Condition*’s lack of “a clearly apparent argumentative structure” has often led to the “bewilderment” of its readers, many of whom “have found it hard to understand what is actually going on in the book.”³

² Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 72.

³ *HC*, viii.

Indeed, Arendt's clear prose has not prevented even thoughtful interpreters, such as Dana Villa, from falling into elementary errors of exposition in discussing Arendt's conception of action. Following George Kateb,⁴ Villa contends that for Arendt, "genuine political action is nothing other than a certain kind of talk, a variety of conversation or argument about public matters."⁵ To be sure, Arendt does indeed stress the interrelatedness of speech and action; "speechless action," she writes, "would no longer be action because... the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words."⁶ But the very fact that she distinguishes between the two faculties evidences that they are not identical phenomena, that action is not "nothing other than talk," neither for her nor the world. Indeed, Arendt states the matter quite clearly in *On Violence* when she writes that "the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world..."⁷ and in *The Human Condition* when she speaks of the shift "from action to speech"⁸ in the ancient Greek *polis*.

But setting aside the manifold textual evidence that could be brought to bear in refuting Villa's interpretation, perhaps the most compelling reason to reject his reading is that it does violence to action's place within the *vita activa* of *The Human Condition*, where it, alongside labor and work, represents one of the "fundamental human activities" corresponding to "the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man."⁹ For if action is mere talk, one wonders about the conspicuous omission of the other activities "that go on directly between men,"¹⁰ not to mention the mysterious fate that befalls the first half of Phoenix' description of Achilles as "the doer of great deeds and the speaker of great words,"¹¹ which Arendt invokes repeatedly to evoke the essence

⁴ See George Kateb, "Political Action: Its Nature and Advantages," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 133.

⁵ Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 31.

⁶ *HC*, 179.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, "On Violence" in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1972), 177. Arendt could of course be referring merely to "violent words," but one suspects not.

⁸ *HC*, 26

⁹ *HC*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *HC*, 25.

of action. Neither what action is for Arendt, nor its point, can be understood without placing it within the context of the *vita activa*; and it is towards explicating action's place within this account that we shall now turn.

Action and the *Vita Activa*

Arendt states at the outset of *The Human Condition* that her intent is “nothing more than to think what we are doing,”¹² and the phrase “what we are doing” is meant in a very literal sense. The crux of *The Human Condition* is the threefold distinction Arendt draws between labor, work and action, which together comprise the *vita activa*; the active life, in contradistinction to the *vita contemplativa*, the life of the philosopher. According to Arendt, the prejudices of philosophers since Plato against the “trifles”¹³ of human affairs have led to an effacement of the distinctions within the *vita activa* itself, to which she intends to restore dignity by reviving our awareness of those distinct experiences.

The first component of the *vita activa* is labor, “which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor.”¹⁴ Labor, for Arendt, is merely one side of the never-ending biological process, the other side of which is consumption; within the labor cycle, the “fruits” of our labors are immediately consumed and used to replenish our bodies’ vital energies, which are in turn used to produce more objects to be consumed. The paradigmatic example of what Arendt calls *animal laborans* (the laboring animal, or man viewed under the aspect of labor) is the subsistence farmer who spends his days toiling in the fields, producing only enough to sustain himself for the next day of labor. The truly definitive aspect of labor, however, is necessity; thus, as Arendt notes, “to have a society of laborers, it is of course not necessary that every member

¹² *HC*, 5.

¹³ Plato, *Laws* VII, 803c.

¹⁴ *HC*, 7.

actually be a laborer or worker... but only that all members consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families”¹⁵ (this is the fate, which is somewhat incidental to our analysis here, that Arendt believes has befallen modern society).

In contrast to labor, which is bound up in the natural life process of the human species, work “corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence,” and provides “an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings.”¹⁶ While the word “labor” can only be used to refer to the act of laboring, which leaves behind no lasting product, it is significant here that the word “work” can be used to refer both to the act of working *and* the finished product. The paradigmatic example of *homo faber* is the artisan, whose craft is conducted in terms of means (the production process) and ends (the finished product). From the perspective of *animal laborans*, work offers a twofold “redemption” of labor; by offering tools that “ease the pain and trouble of laboring,” and by erecting “a world of durability” for persons to inhabit.¹⁷ The defining aspect of work is that it is oriented by an end— the idea of the object to be made, a sort of mental blueprint, that is raised up in the mind of the craftsman before he begins his work, thus guiding the “means” he employs to that end.

The dynamics of work, however, entail their own set of problems for *homo faber*. To be more precise, the trouble starts when the logic of means and ends, which Arendt claims are valid only in the sphere of work, invades other aspects of life (this is a recurring theme in *The Human Condition* – equally problematic for Arendt is the encroachment of labor and necessity upon work and action). And there is no doubt that this employment of means-end reasoning is pervasive, particularly in politics. Max Weber once wrote that “all serious reflection about the ultimate elements of meaningful human conduct is oriented primarily in terms of the categories ‘end’ and ‘means’”¹⁸; and

¹⁵ *HC*, 46.

¹⁶ *HC*, 7.

¹⁷ *HC*, 236.

¹⁸ Max Weber, “Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” 52.

not only would many agree with him, but it is also likely that they would find such a proposition to be self-evident, even beyond dispute. But Arendt argues that the application of means-end logic to politics carries with it some disturbing implications.

For one, orienting political action towards some supreme end by *definition* justifies all means employed towards that end – for what is an end but a justification of why certain means are being employed? The goal of “making” a truly just society, of realizing a utopian blueprint, has justified untold human suffering throughout the 20th century; the Soviet Union being the most obvious example (though it is worth pointing out that the opposite goal -- stopping the spread of communism -- has justified comparable evils). As the old cliché goes, “you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs”; the eggs, in this case, merely happening to be people. To be sure, one can of course invoke other “values” or “ends” to oppose cruel or inhumane means; but insofar as something like “communism” or “stopping communism” is set out as the *ultimate* end, there is no way subordinate ends can prevail within this argumentative framework. And as soon as one attempts to argue that “not all means are permissible” or that “under certain circumstances means may be more important than ends,” Arendt rightly points out that one begins “to speak in paradoxes, the definition of an end being precisely the justification of the means.”¹⁹ In other words, these arguments are in a sense eminently reasonable, as they reflect our justifiable horror at the evils engendered by means-end reasoning; but they are also doomed to failure, as they remain trapped within a conceptual framework that invariably ensures their defeat. As long as we conceive of politics principally in terms of means and ends, Arendt argues, we shall be perpetual witnesses to the story Randall Jarrell pithily expressed in his poem “A War”:

There set out, slowly, for a Different World,
At four, on winter mornings, different legs . . .
You can't break eggs without making an omelet
– That's what they tell the eggs.

¹⁹ HC, 229.

But there is also a second, equally disturbing problem entailed by means-end reasoning. Not only do ends, by their very nature, justify all means; the framework of means and ends is also totally impotent when it comes to justifying the ends themselves. Utilitarianism, for example, is a philosophical doctrine that holds that the end of all action should be to maximize the utility of the greatest number of people. But, as Arendt writes, the “perplexity of utilitarianism is that it gets caught in the unending chain of means and ends without ever arriving at some principle which could justify the category of means and end, that is, of utility itself.” In other words, the utilitarian has no answer when asked “the question which Lessing once put to the utilitarian philosophers of his time: ‘And what is the use of use?’”²⁰ The problem, Arendt claims, is that “the ‘in order to’ has become the content of the ‘for the sake of’; in other words, utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness.”²¹ This perplexity, which emerges as soon as one approaches the “for the sake of” in terms of means and ends, is poetically expressed by the The Kinks in the song “Oklahoma U.S.A.”: “All life we work, but work is a bore. If life’s for living, what’s living for?”

As one might suspect at this point, the problems inherent in the mentality of *homo faber* are redeemed, for Arendt, through the faculty of action. Action, she writes, is the “only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter,” and “corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”²² Through action and the related faculty of speech, man has the unique ability “to communicate himself and not merely something... through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct... like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.”²³ Action is also man’s capacity to start something utterly new, “which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before”²⁴; as

²⁰ *HC*, 154.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *HC*, 7.

²³ *HC*, 176.

²⁴ *HC*, 178.

opposed to labor, which is an endlessly recurring cycle, and work, which always pursues a predictable, definite aim. In contrast to work, Arendt stresses that action has *no* end; both because it sets in motion unpredictable processes “that can quite literally endure... until mankind itself has come to an end,”²⁵ and because it is a self contained activity, a true “end unto itself,” in much the same way that the goal of a performing – as opposed to a plastic – art is contained within the performance itself.²⁶ Additionally, action solves *homo faber’s* “predicament of meaningless, the ‘devaluation of all values,’” because of its capacity to “produce meaningful stories as naturally as fabrication produces use objects.”²⁷

All three of the activities Arendt identifies within the *vita activa* refer to phenomena that can be found in the world – but at the same time they designate something more as well, what we might express imperfectly as the proper *ethos* associated with each of these spheres. That is not to say that there is a clear division to be made here between phenomenon and ethos (quite the contrary, I would argue), but merely to draw attention to the fact that, as Hanna Pitkin points out, there is a certain ambiguity with regard to what Arendt is actually referring to when she speaks of labor, work, and action.²⁸ At this point, I hope to have made clear the domain of activities that Arendt designates with these terms; hopefully, both the ethos of labor and that of work should be somewhat clear as well. But I entertain no such hope with regard to the ethos of action. Indeed, while action is perhaps the easiest component to grasp of the *vita activa* in terms of domain – it’s simply what goes on between people – almost every specific claim Arendt makes about action seems perplexing at first glance. It is to the consideration of these perplexities that I will turn next, with the intent that their consideration shall both further illuminate what action *is*, and point the way towards why it matters.

²⁵ *HC*, 233.

²⁶ See “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 152. It is valid to question whether is tenable to place “plastic” and “performing” arts within different categories of the *vita activa* in the way Arendt seems to do here; I will suggest later in this essay that the “creative act” more generally is an area in which her distinction between work and action beings to break down.

²⁷ *HC*, 236.

²⁸ Hanna Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 179.

Before continuing, however, it is necessary to make a brief clarifying point now in order to avoid confusion later. The component activities of the *vita activa*, the use of terms like *animal laborans* and *homo faber* notwithstanding, do not designate classes of people; rather, they are just that, activities people engage in. To the extent that we are bound by the needs of our bodies, we are all implicated in at least the consumption side of the laboring process; moreover, to the extent that we “work” to “make a living,” our work is conducted under the aspect of labor and necessity, whether we are a craftsman or a congressman or a professional academic. Furthermore, even one who finds employment in a genuinely non-productive, laboring capacity may produce works in his spare time, and thus contribute to the totality of reified objects that we call the “world.”²⁹ And to the extent that we are all human beings who interact with other human beings in word and deed, even in a private capacity,³⁰ we are men and women of action. Indeed, action is an activity from which, Arendt claims, “no human being can refrain and still be human.” For while it is possible, for an individual at least, to refrain from labor and work, “a life without speech and without action... is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.”³¹

The Perplexities of Action

As mentioned above, Arendt’s description of action in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere is somewhat puzzling. Perhaps the most immediately strange element of action is Arendt’s insistence that it takes place outside the realm of means and ends. Arendt, of course, does speak of “motives” and “aims” with regard to action, but only in the context of making the even more befuddling

²⁹ Taken to the extreme of triviality, even a blog entry or tweet is in a sense a “reified thought,” and thus a contribution to the human artifice.

³⁰ See Hannah Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” in *Responsibility and Judgement* (New York: Random House, 2003), 112, for a discussion of action in the private sphere. While Arendt’s discussion of action in *The Human Condition* is almost exclusively of action in a political sense, there is no reason to think that she thinks of action itself as exclusively political; indeed, banishing action from the private sphere would do violence to the completeness of the *vita activa* and raise the aforementioned question of what we are to make of the other activities that go on “between men.”

³¹ *HC*, 176

statement that “action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, and its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other.”³² Arendt continues:

That is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act, but they are its determining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them... Action insofar as it is free is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will... but springs from something altogether different which... I shall call a principle... such principles are honor or glory, love of equality, which Montesquieu called virtue, or distinction or excellence... but also fear or distrust or hatred... Freedom or its opposite appears in the world whenever such principles are actualized; the appearance of freedom, like the manifestation of principles, coincides with the performing act. Men are free... as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same.³³

And the perplexities do not end there. Arendt goes on to say that if “we understand the political in the sense of the polis, its end or *raison d'être* would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear,”³⁴; with freedom’s “field of experience” being action.³⁵ This seems utterly confusing, and not just because we are accustomed to thinking of politics as a means to private happiness. For if the end of politics is to make room for freedom, and if freedom is political action, then politics and action are always self-referential; the end of politics is politics, the end of action is action. But this seems a grotesque misunderstanding of what politics is about. Even if Arendt concedes that “most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent,”³⁶ isn’t it absurd to say that the *real* point of politics isn’t about what we talk about when we talk about politics – the conditions of the poor, for example, which Arendt calls “the social question” and insists emphatically must be kept out of politics³⁷ – but merely, as it were, the exhilarating sense of freedom we find in politics itself?

³² Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 150.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 153.

³⁵ Ibid, 145.

³⁶ *HC*, 182.

³⁷ See virtually the entirety of *On Revolution*; particularly page 102, where Arendt writes that “the whole record of past revolutions demonstrates beyond doubt that every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads to terror.”

Another layer of difficulty is added when one considers the relationship of action to what Arendt in *The Human Condition* calls “behavior.” Behavior seems to be a sort of bastard activity for Arendt, occupying no place within the *vita activa*; though it apparently corresponds to roughly the same *domain* of activity as action. Indeed, the first mention of behavior in *The Human Condition* is in reference to action, which she says “would be an unnecessary luxury, a capricious interference with general laws of behavior, if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing.”³⁸ When Arendt next mentions it, it is in the context of “society,” which “excludes the possibility of action”; instead expecting “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.”³⁹ In other words, behavior “is a kind of uncritical self-subjection to unquestioned rules,”⁴⁰ as Hanna Pitkin puts it; “action manqué, the failure to act, opportunities for action missed or denied, an abdication of one’s human capacity and responsibility to act.”⁴¹ Pitkin’s interpretation of the relationship between behavior and action, however, is problematic, as she herself notes. “If behavior is the failure to act,” she writes, “how does one tell it from deliberate *inaction*... the action of refraining? ... Besides, we know that behavior is by no means equivalent to doing nothing; it often involves obsessive, even frantic activity.”⁴²

Setting aside for the moment the other perplexities we have identified, I want to focus further on the relationship between behavior and action, which I think is key to understanding the meaning of action in Arendt’s thought. We can gain some understanding of this relationship by examining briefly a figure who epitomizes “behaving” as opposed to “acting” man: Adolf

³⁸ *HC*, 8.

³⁹ *HC*, 40

⁴⁰ Pitkin, 179.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 181.

⁴² *Ibid*.

Eichmann. It is not necessary here to discuss the role Eichmann played during the Holocaust, nor his subsequent capture and trial in Israel, which Arendt covered for *The New Yorker* and from which she coined the term “the banality of evil.” But it is worth quoting Arendt on what she saw as Eichmann’s most distinguishing feature: his inability to *think*.

[In covering Eichmann’s trial,] I was struck by a manifest shallowness... that made it impossible to trace the incontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer... was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous... the only notable characteristic one could detect [in him] was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*... His cliché-ridden language produced... a kind of macabre comedy.⁴³

Arendt’s comments indicate here – and I think this is a relatively intuitive point – that “behavior” in the Arendtian sense stems from an absence of thought in those who are behaving. It follows, then, that *the meaning of action is related intimately to our faculty of thinking*. But surprisingly, Arendt does not ascribe to this notion; on the contrary, she emphasizes repeatedly that “Action... stands in the sharpest possible opposition to the solitary business of thought.”⁴⁴ To this, I quote (via Arendt) Kant’s observation that “it is by no means unusual, upon comparing the thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject... to find that we understand him better than he has understood himself. As he has not sufficiently determined his concept, he has sometimes spoken, or even thought, in opposition to his own intention.”⁴⁵ Indeed, there are several moments in Arendt’s reflections on thought and action where she seems to manifestly contradict herself, even within the same paragraph; but before we can consider why this may be the case, it must first be established that the link between thought and action which I am alleging exists in the first place. To this end, we now turn to Arendt’s reflections on thinking in *The Life of the Mind*.

⁴³ Hannah Arendt, *Thinking in The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1981), 4.

⁴⁴ *Willing in The Life of the Mind*, 200.

⁴⁵ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A314. The remark is quoted by Arendt in *Thinking*, page 63, where she notes that it “is of course applicable to [Kant’s] own work” as well.

Truth, Meaning and the World of Appearances

The key to understanding what Arendt means by “thinking” in *The Life of the Mind* is the distinction she draws between cognition, the acquisition of knowledge, and thinking, the quest for meaning. Before proceeding to discuss this distinction, however, it is necessary to attend to the phenomenology of what Arendt calls “the world of appearances” – a term that corresponds to what Arendt merely calls “the world” in *The Human Condition*.⁴⁶

“In this world which we enter,” Arendt writes, “appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*.”⁴⁷ The old two-world theories in which there is a “true” world of “forms” or “things-in-themselves” beneath the world of appearances, Arendt contends, no longer make sense in the modern age. All there is, or at least all that could possibly be relevant to human existence, is appearance all the way down. Because of this, though we appear in a world that is common to us all, that world seems different to each individual; “Seeming – the it-seems-to-me, *dokei moi* – is the mode, perhaps the only possible one, in which an appearing world is acknowledged and perceived.”⁴⁸

The subjectivity of perception is mitigated, however, by the presence of what Arendt calls “common sense,” which fits “the sensations of my strictly private five senses... into a common world shared by others.”⁴⁹ It is this “sixth sense” which guarantees that “members of the same species have the context in common that endows every single object with its particular meaning,” and in turn creates “the *sensation of reality*”⁵⁰ (though it seems plain enough that Arendt is wrong to say “species”; surely it is only among those sharing a common cultural background that an object

⁴⁶ The fact that Arendt associates worldliness in *The Human Condition* with work and its physical products tends to obscure the fact that it is not the physical nature of works that is decisive in making them “worldly”; it is their place within the human order of meanings. A chair is worldly not because of its physical structure *per se*, but because of the uses associated with it (sitting, etc.), its aesthetic qualities, emotional associations, etc. – all things “considerably less tangible than the structure perceived by our eyes” (*Thinking*, 171).

⁴⁷ *Thinking*, 19

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 50.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*.

can be said to have a shared meaning). It is because of common sense that we can be said to inhabit a common world, despite the subjectivity of individual experience.

But this intersubjectively shared set of meanings that make up our common world by no means affords us anything like an “objective” frame of reference. Quoting Merleau-Ponty, Arendt notes that “generally speaking, [appearances] never just reveal; they also conceal – ‘No thing, no side of a thing, shows itself except by actively hiding the others.’”⁵¹ It follows, then, that every culturally shared disclosure of what a thing means inevitably entails a concealment of other possible ways in which that thing could appear.

We can see what this relationship between appearing and concealing means in practice by looking at the U.S. media’s coverage of American military engagements in other countries. During the first Iraq War, news networks “saturated their coverage with Pentagon press briefings that included dramatic visuals of bombs mounted with cameras striking targets in Iraq,” the result being “imagery that made the war look, to use a popular metaphor, like a video game.”⁵² Thus, “American audiences were shown an essentially ‘clean’ war, despite the loss of an estimated 100,000 Iraqi soldiers and perhaps the same number of civilians...”⁵³ The same revealing-concealing relationship is inherent in the language used to cover wars. “Collateral damage,” “regime change” and “enhanced interrogation methods” are all phrases that reveal, as they each cause an image to *appear* in our minds; but they also serve to conceal, as the images they conjure up are quite different from other images which could be evoked by different descriptions of the same phenomena (“loss of innocent life,” “unprovoked war of aggression,” “torture”). The point here is not that the former descriptions are deceptive (though one could certainly make that case); but rather that, as Nietzsche says, “There

⁵¹ Ibid, 25.

⁵² Sean Aday. 2005. “The Real War Will Never Get on Television: An Analysis of Casualty Imagery” in Doris A. Graber (ed.) *Media Power in Politics*, Sixth Edition. Washington: CQ Press. 329.

⁵³ Ibid, 330.

is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing,’”⁵⁴ with all the limitations that implies for our ability to perceive and understand the world.

At this point, we can discuss what Arendt means by distinguishing between “cognition” and “thinking.” The former, which aims to acquire knowledge and “whose highest criterion is truth, derives that criterion from the world of appearances,”⁵⁵ and thus remains bound to both our sense perceptions and the “common” sense which guarantees our shared world. A false statement – (“the sky is green,” for example) can only be refuted by appealing to evidence contrary to that statement; and this is either sensory in nature (i.e. taking the person outside and *showing* them the sky) or refers to sensory evidence (saying, “the sky is not green, it’s blue”). Because of this, “the activity of knowing is no less related to our sense of reality and no less of a world-building activity than the building of houses.”⁵⁶

But thinking, which searches for the meaning of things and “subjects everything it gets hold of to doubt, has no such natural, matter-of-fact relation to reality.” On the contrary, it entails a withdrawal from the world of appearances, “from the sensorially given and hence also from the feeling of realness, given by common sense.”⁵⁷ Instead, thinking stems from (and also leads to) a sense of perplexity, which varies in its intensity in accordance with its object; slight, with regard to things like “house,” greater with respect to things like “love” and “justice,” and perhaps greatest of all with regard to the meaning of life itself. Meaning, then, is in a way a narrower concern than knowledge, as it deals with the component words and concepts which make up any factual statement, but which have no truth-value in themselves (“regime change” is neither a true nor false statement; indeed, it is not a statement at all). But it is at the same time also a broader concern, as it deals with the fundamental concepts that orient how we understand and act in the world.

⁵⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals in Basic Writings*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 555.

⁵⁵ *Thinking*, 57.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 57.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 54.

From the standpoint of common sense, however, thinking's search for meaning and the withdrawal from the world of appearances that accompanies it is meaningless, "because it is the sixth sense's function to fit us into the world of appearances and make us at home in the world given by our five senses; there we are and no questions asked."⁵⁸ Furthermore, thinking is entirely unproductive – the only knowledge Socrates, the thinker *par excellence*, ever gathered from thinking was that that he knew nothing. As Arendt notes:

Socrates [in searching for the meaning of a word] concludes virtually every strictly Socratic dialogue⁵⁹ by saying: 'I have failed utterly to discover what it is.' And this aporetic character of Socratic thinking means: admiring wonder at just or courageous deeds seen by the eyes of the body gives birth to such questions as What is courage? What is justice?... The basic Socratic question – what do we mean when we use this class of words, later called 'concepts?' – arises out of that experience. But the original wonder is not only not resolved in such questions, since they remain without answer, but are even reinforced. What begins as wonder ends in perplexity and thence leads back to wonder: How marvelous that men can perform courageous or just deeds even though they do not know, can give no account of, what courage and justice are."⁶⁰

Thought and Action

At this point, the similarities between thought and action should seem somewhat obvious. Both are self-contained activities with no point outside themselves, and both are indispensable to the formation of meaning, the latter providing the raw material for the former's generation of meaningful stories. "All thought arises out of experience," Arendt writes, "but no experience yields any meaning or even coherence without undergoing the operations of imagining and thinking."⁶¹ But even more importantly, it seems to me that both thought and action form the essential preconditions for each other's existence. We have already seen that thought, for Arendt, always arises from the experience of action⁶²; but on the other side of the coin, not thinking teaches people "to

⁵⁸ Ibid, 59.

⁵⁹ By this Arendt presumably means to exclude the dialogues of Plato's middle and later periods.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 165.

⁶¹ Ibid, 87.

⁶² In addition to the two previous quotations, see "What Remains? The Language Remains": A Conversation with Günter Gaus" in *Essays in Understanding* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 20. "Every thought is an afterthought," Arendt writes, "that is, a reflection on some matter or event."

hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society” – in other words, it teaches them to behave and not to act. “What people then get used to is less the content of the rules, a close examination of which [by thinking] would always lead them into perplexity, than the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars.”⁶³

But, as I mentioned previously, this reading is in utmost contradiction to what Arendt herself has to say about thought and action. “Action,” she assures us, “stands in the sharpest possible opposition to the solitary business of thought.”⁶⁴ Thinking “has no political relevance unless special emergencies arise,”⁶⁵ and in those “rare moments when the stakes are on the table,”⁶⁶ it does not lead to action *per se*, but to the refusal to join in with what everyone else is doing, which “becomes a kind of action”⁶⁷ through inaction. Arendt also gives us the bizarrely contradictory statement that although mental activities “can never directly change reality—indeed in our world there is no clearer or more radical opposition than that between thinking and doing—the principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives depend ultimately on the life of the mind.”⁶⁸ This statement seems so strange that, in the absence of her other words on the subject, one would be tempted to simply give a narrow reading to the “radical opposition” she describes here; but as the matter stands, we must take Arendt at her word when she insists that thinking is a politically marginal activity.

⁶³ *Thinking*, 177.

⁶⁴ *Willing*, 200.

⁶⁵ *Thinking*, 192

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 193.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 192.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 71. Admittedly, “mental activities” for Arendt include willing and judging as well, which I do not discuss at any length in this essay. Willing, however, has little to do with “principles” and “concepts,” while judgement depends on the “liberating effect of thinking” (*Responsibility and Judgement*, 189) for its very existence. If Arendt’s point about the “political irrelevance” of thought is merely that it does not lead to action “directly,” but rather leads to another activity which then leads to action, then her point is, I think, a little pedantic; is it really fair to say that my arm is “irrelevant” to catching a ball because it merely has a “liberating effect” on my hand’s ability to be in the correct position? But it seems more likely to me, for reasons I discuss below, that Arendt means what she says about thought only being relevant to judgement and action in “political emergencies”; and this, I think, is a critical error on her part.

Obviously, I think Arendt is wrong in this respect. But in the interest of completeness, let us briefly discuss the reasons why Arendt thinks this is the case. Firstly, she says, thinking always involves a “stop-and-think” which interrupts any doing.⁶⁹ Secondly, action deals with particulars in the world, while thought, which withdraws from the world of appearances, deals with generalities, which can never “be valid in the field of ethics or politics.”⁷⁰ Finally, Arendt opposes action and thought because in action “a We is always engaged in changing our common world,” while thought “operates in a dialogue between me and myself.”⁷¹

With regard to the first two of these reasons, Arendt’s error is rather simple. Previously,⁷² I warned against the mistake of treating the activities of the *vita activa* as corresponding to classes of people, instead of as activities that we all for the most part engage in; here, Arendt falls into that very trap herself. For while it seems reasonable enough to say that people cannot think and act *simultaneously*, it is false to speak of actors and thinkers as if these designate different species of people, as Arendt does on multiple occasions.⁷³ The third point, however, is more complicated, and requires revisiting the phenomenology of the thinking process.

According to Arendt, thinking always takes the form of a silent dialogue with one’s self, which she calls the “two-in-one.” This inner dialogue is what leads us to strive towards being as we wish to appear to others, even when no one else is there to witness our acts; the thought being that by doing otherwise, we will destroy the friendship with ourselves which allows us to think. For “who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer?”⁷⁴ It is this concern, which is absent from those who do not think, that gives rise to one’s character and personality. But for Arendt, this effect is entirely negative; it “will never tell you what to do, only prevent you from

⁶⁹ Ibid, 78.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 200.

⁷¹ *Willing*, 200.

⁷² On page 12.

⁷³ See *Thinking*, 72; *Willing*, 198.

⁷⁴ *Thinking*, 188.

doing certain things, even though they are done by everybody around you.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, this kind of (in)action, “politically speaking,” is “irresponsible,” as “its standard is the self and not the world, neither its improvement nor change.”⁷⁶ Arendt is guided in these two assertions by the example of Socrates, who famously held that it was better to suffer wrong than to do wrong. And this is, indeed, an entirely passive proposition. But if one looks at the thinking experience itself and not merely this particular manifestation of it, is it not possible that one could think not just “I cannot remain friends with myself if I do evil,” but also “I cannot keep myself as a friend *if I do nothing?*” Or that “I cannot keep myself as a friend if I sacrifice the world to maintain my integrity – I must do evil things, despite the anguish they cause me, because the alternative is far worse?” (“The time is out of joint,” Hamlet says – “O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!”)

The example of Socrates, at least, shows us that thinking is dependent on action; as Arendt notes, “the extent to which the old and once very paradoxical statement ‘It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong,’ has won the agreement of civilized men is due primarily to the fact that Socrates gave an example and hence became an example for a certain way of conduct and a certain way of deciding between right and wrong.”⁷⁷ But since his act was, in a sense, negative (if one is referring merely to his refusal to flee Athens and not his conduct during his trial), we must look elsewhere if we are to seek evidence of action’s dependence on thought, the denial of which seems to be the crux of Arendt’s insistence on their “radical opposition” to each other.

To that end, I would like to quote the following recollections at length, which come from a man in attendance at a 1969 speech given by Randy Kehler, then head of the War Resisters League in San Francisco:

I was very taken with what a good impression of America this young man gave. He was very articulate, very sincere in his speech, and very earnest. And I was thinking, *I’m glad the foreigners in this audience are seeing him. What a good example of an American he is, the best we have.* And in the course of his speech he said, “Last month our friend Davis Harris went to prison

⁷⁵ *Responsibility and Judgement*, 105.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Responsibility and Judgement*, 144.

[for draft resistance]. Terry and John are gone. Yesterday our friend Bob went to jail.” He said, “Soon there will be no men left in the office, only women. And I’m very excited that soon I’ll be able to join them.”

And he said this very calmly. I hadn't known that he was about to be sentenced for draft resistance. It hit me as a total surprise and shock, because I heard his words in the midst of actually feeling proud of my country listening to him. And then I heard he was going to prison. It wasn't what he said exactly that changed my worldview. It was the example he was setting with his life. How his words in general showed that he was a stellar American, and that he was going to jail as a very deliberate choice—because he thought it was the right thing to do. There was no question in my mind that my government was involved in an unjust war that was going to continue and get larger. Thousands of young men were dying each year. I left the auditorium and found a deserted men's room. I sat on the floor and cried for over an hour, just sobbing. The only time in my life I've reacted to something like that. And there were words that kept coming through my head. Words that his action had put in my head. The first sentence was, *We are eating our young. We are consuming them whether in the jungles or on the barricades.*

And I thought of a line from a song by Leonard Cohen, “Dress Rehearsal Rag.” The line was: “So it’s come to this. And wasn’t it a long way down. Ah, wasn’t it a strange way down.”

And I was thinking, *My country has come to this. That the best thing a young man can do is go to prison.*

And then I thought – and these were the words he put in my head, the words that changed my life – *What can I do to help end this war, if I’m ready to go to prison?*⁷⁸

The man I’ve quoted here is Daniel Ellsberg, who went on to make copies of and distribute what later became known as the Pentagon Papers – a secret history, commissioned internally by the Department of Defense, of the United States government’s ignoble conduct in waging the Vietnam War. I’ve quoted his account of the thought process which lead him to release these papers at such length for a number of reasons. Firstly, I think that it captures perfectly the intimate unity of thought and action that I have been alleging thus far; and which Arendt rejects, I think, through uncritical subscription to a philosophical tradition that holds, from Plato to Heidegger, that thought and action are radically opposed. Kehler’s words and actions made a profound effect on Ellsberg’s thought; not necessarily with regard to the Vietnam War (he was already at an antiwar rally), but in the sense that they made him reflect on the *meaning* of what Kehler was doing, and that those reflections led him in turn to *act* in a way that he never would have done otherwise.

⁷⁸ Marlo Thomas, *The Right Words at the Right Time* (New York: Atria Books, 2002), 101-102.

But moreover, I think Ellsberg's story is a powerful validation of Arendt's account of action in general. Of the pleasure and sense of meaning that comes from acting politically.⁷⁹ Of the intertwinedness of word and deed. Of the unpredictability of action's effects in the world, and its transcendence of the categories "means" and "ends."⁸⁰ Of how to act means to start something new, which was not even a possibility before. And that there is something in "the shining glory of great deeds" which shatters the grip of common sense on our world, of what we previously thought was possible, which makes us think, and which in turn leads us to act in ways of which we would otherwise be incapable.

Randy Kehler never thought his going to prison would end the war. If I hadn't met Randy Kehler it wouldn't have occurred to me to copy those papers. His actions spoke to me as no mere words would have done. He put the right question in my mind at the right time.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Reflecting on a vigil he attended, Ellsberg also wrote that the "very act of supporting a draft resister on a downtown street corner liberated me from a great fear, which was the fear of looking absurd" (Ibid, 101).

⁸⁰ Neither Kehler nor Ellsberg thought their actions would achieve the "aim" they intended – that is, the end of the war – yet both felt compelled and found a sense of meaning in acting regardless. Likewise, Ellsberg had no idea that his actions would prompt the string of illegal wiretappings and break-ins that would eventually lead to Nixon's resignation during the Watergate scandal.

⁸¹ Ibid, 103.

Interlude

So where do we stand in making sense of Arendt's account of action? Admittedly, we have made some progress. The idea that thinking opens up new possibilities for action – or, to put it differently, makes action possible – is surely given some credence by Ellsberg's account of his own experience in action, as are the ideas that action both transcends means and ends and generates meaning. But in other ways our account thus far has been manifestly deficient. Does an action undertaken with a certain end in mind – as Ellsberg's certainly was – truly “transcend” its end because it is undertaken with no hope of accomplishing it?⁸² And why is starting something “new,” for Arendt, so close to action's essence? Does one act only in blind opposition to tradition, and fail to act simply because what one does has been done before? This is an absurd proposition, especially since action would then seem to cut off potentialities for action in the future – once an act has been “done,” all acts inspired by that original action are merely derivative in character, and thus not properly “acts” at all. What's more, this account casts action as an at least potentially solipsistic activity, which is in clear contradiction to both Arendt's characterization – a “we” changing a “common world” – and in how the phenomenon has presented itself in Ellsberg's account. For Ellsberg never truly acted alone; he had accomplices even in leaking the Pentagon Papers; and furthermore, his aim was one undertaken for the sake of the political community, an aspect that is totally incidental to action in our account. Finally, we have given no account of action's relation to freedom, though Arendt manifestly states that “to *be* free and to act are the same.”⁸³ Again, we can imagine Ellsberg “feeling free” in his action – but this tells us nothing, especially since Arendt states (and seems correct in stating) that the “inner feeling” of freedom which “remains without outer

⁸² As if I could “transcend” my undergraduate studies by making no effort to pass any of my classes.

⁸³ “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, 151.

manifestations” is “politically irrelevant.”⁸⁴ Thus, we are left with no inkling of the freedom belonging to political action *qua* action.

This last point – the question of “freedom” – in particular points the way towards which our analysis must now proceed. Arendt’s account of freedom, and thus of action, is both deeply indebted to and a profound repudiation of the notion of freedom presented by Martin Heidegger. Furthermore, Arendt’s account of “the world of appearances” in *The Life of the Mind* is also an essentially derivative account of Heidegger’s account of “worldhood” – though as we shall see later, Arendt’s conception of the world is also a critical response to Heidegger’s, particularly in *The Human Condition*. Thus, I shall now proceed to explicate Heidegger’s account of Being-in-the-World as the essential state of human existence. If I succeed in explicating his account (which is by no means a given; Bertrand Russell once diplomatically described Heidegger’s terminology as “highly eccentric,” adding that “One cannot help suspecting that language is here running riot.”⁸⁵), then Arendt’s account should become clearer in itself; furthermore, we will then be adequately situated to appreciate Arendt’s critique of Heidegger’s philosophy.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 145.

⁸⁵ Bertrand Russell, *Wisdom of the West* (New York: Crescent Books, 1989), p. 303.

II. Being-in-the-World

Martin Heidegger devoted virtually the entirety of his philosophical career to answering a single question: what does it mean to be? Ontology – the study of being – and metaphysics have both generally been oriented towards categorizing entities in the world; a classic ontological distinction is that between things that exist in time (e.g. human beings) and outside of time (God, the Forms, etc.). Heidegger, on the other hand, thought that this concern with beings conceals a more fundamental question: what is it on the virtue of which beings *are* in the first place, what does it mean for something *to be*? One encounters an obvious problem as soon as one attempts to answer this question; for in saying “Being *is*...” one already presupposes an understanding of what it means to be, which is what one is supposed to be explaining. Heidegger did not think of this difficulty as insurmountable, however, and the question of Being (the “to be,” the act of Being, as opposed to “being” as a noun) oriented his thinking from *Being and Time* until his death.

Any discussion of Heidegger’s philosophy is bound to become perplexing if one does not keep in mind one key fact. In inquiring into Being, Heidegger takes *man* as the object of his inquiry – or, to use Heidegger’s terminology, “Dasein” (which literally means “Being-there” and can also be translated as “presence,” though “human being” is probably the best translation for our purposes). The justification Heidegger presents at the outset of *Being and Time* for inquiring into Being this way is that Dasein’s Being is an issue for itself – that we, as human beings, care about our existence and what it means to exist. This reason doesn’t make very much sense in itself, and in reality Heidegger is holding out on the reader. The real reason is that Heidegger goes on to claim that Being is something only Dasein⁸⁶ possesses – which, on the face of it, doesn’t make very much sense either, but begins to once one grasps what Heidegger means by “Being.”⁸⁷ The fact that Heidegger’s

⁸⁶ And perhaps, to some extent, animals as well.

⁸⁷ This does not mean, however, that the external world is not “there” – only that “in itself” it is something very different than how it appears to us, or how it could *ever* appear to us.

ontological inquiry occurs from the standpoint of Dasein, and that “the question of Being” is really something akin to “what does it mean to exist?” or even “what is the meaning of life?”, clarifies many aspects of Heidegger’s philosophy which are otherwise somewhat puzzling, such as his treatment of topics which might seem more relevant to psychology than ontology (Dasein’s “state-of-mind”) and his fundamental contention that entities’ way of Being depends on their relationship to Dasein.

Heidegger contra Descartes

The best way to grasp Heidegger’s philosophy is to juxtapose it against the traditional understanding of how humans encounter the world, which has its most straightforward modern representative in Descartes. The standard Cartesian model of knowing the universe is that of man as thinking a subject – the *cogito ergo sum*. This subject relates itself through mental representations to the surrounding world, which is made up of various objects. These objects are in turn defined by their properties; the door to my room, for example, is made of wood, painted white, and has a metallic doorknob. The wood, paint, and metal doorknob have certain molecular structures that can be subjected to further analysis, and so on and so forth. The way of Being belonging to objects might also be called the way of Being of “substances,” and is, again, I think a very common-sense way of understanding how human beings operate and the nature of things that exist. Even other human beings, most of us would be inclined to say, basically exist as things with certain physical properties which are independent of any subject perceiving them. Heidegger has a term for this way of Being, which he calls “presence-at-hand,” and his description essentially corresponds to what I have described thus far – with one essential difference. Heidegger, as it turns out, thinks that presence-at-hand is *not* the basic way in which things exist; that encountering things as present-at-hand is not our primary way of engaging with the world.

According to Heidegger, there are actually *three* ways in which things can be in the world.⁸⁸ One of these is presence-at-hand, which I have already described. Our more *basic* way of encountering things in the world, Heidegger says, is to encounter them as equipment, or as what he calls the “ready-to-hand.” The basic idea here is that our fundamental way of encountering things in the world is to use them, to consider them in terms of our possibilities for action. Thus, while I can treat a door in the detached, “objective” manner described above, this would actually be a somewhat unusual way for the door to enter into my world; a much more ordinary way is to encounter the door by using it – as a door.

The idea that readiness-to-hand is somehow more basic than presence-at-hand seems counterintuitive at first – even ludicrous – but is actually quite plausible. Consider this: how many times have you used a door today? Presuming that you have left your house – and even if you haven’t – the answer is probably more times than you can count. Now consider this: how many times today have you objectively taken stock of the door’s properties as something present-at-hand? I have personally done this once today – when I was writing the paragraph on Descartes – but a much more typical answer I think would be something like zero. Thus, Heidegger seems to have a point in considering presence-at-hand to be a somewhat more peculiar and less basic way of encountering things in the world than that of equipment.

The third and final way of Being, as one might have already suspected, is that of human beings – Dasein. Dasein’s way of Being is what Heidegger calls Being-in-the-world, which “amounts to a non-thematic circumspective absorption in references or assignments constitutive for the readiness-to-hand of a totality of equipment.”⁸⁹ This, of course, sounds like an instance of what Russell would call “language running riot,” but can be made sensible if we take it apart into its

⁸⁸ Though interestingly enough, Heidegger does not make an absolute claim in this regard; “Perhaps even readiness-to-hand and equipment have nothing to contribute as ontological clues in Interpreting the primitive world,” he writes, though “certainly the ontology of Thinghood [substances] does even less.” See *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 113.

⁸⁹ *Being and Time*, 107.

elements. “Non-thematic” essentially means “non-theoretical” – we don’t have to understand anything about Being-in-the-world or read Heidegger to be in the world, we just *are*. Furthermore, when we use things in the world, we are for the most part not concerned with the things we are using, but rather what we are using them *for*.⁹⁰ “Circumspective” refers to a kind of “sight” that goes along with using equipment – I can in a way “see” what will happen if I step on the gas pedal in my car, for example (though it is important to note that Heidegger is using “sight” metaphorically – there is no need for me to actually mentally visualize what will happen in this instance). The idea of a “totality of equipment” is that anything we use and encounter in the world only makes sense in the context of a greater totality of meaningful things – the notion of a “car” only makes sense in relation to “roads” and “places to go” and “gas stations,” etc. The “world” is both this totality and the condition for having such a totality of meanings. Finally, we are for the most part “absorbed” in this world; this again gets at the idea that we don’t need to think about things in the world to use them, but also that in not thinking about them we tend to take for granted our system of meanings – our world – as it is.

Aside from things like “cars” and “doors,” we make use of all sorts of somewhat more abstract concepts in our everyday, absorbed dealings with the world as well.⁹¹ The notion of “professor,” for example, does not make sense outside of a referential totality of other concepts – “students,” “college,” “classes,” “tenure,” etc. Concepts like this make it possible to go about our daily affairs without much thought. Students, for example, go to class as part of a routine, and they are not amazed when the professor stands at the front of a classroom and starts lecturing, because they have an understanding of what professors do and how other things – students, lecterns, etc. –

⁹⁰ “That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves. On the contrary, that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work... The work bears with it that referential totality within which the equipment is encountered.” Ibid, 99.

⁹¹ “When we are one another in public, our everyday concern does not encounter just equipment and work; it likewise encounters what is ‘given’ along with these: ‘affairs’, undertakings, incidents, mishaps.” Ibid, 439.

fit into this activity. On the contrary, this all seems very normal to them, and to us, because we are absorbed and feel at home in the world.

The “They”

One of the consequences of inhabiting a common world in the way Heidegger describes is that, to put it simply, people generally do things in pretty much the same way. This reason for this, according to Heidegger, is that the meaning of things in the world is constituted by their relation to Dasein’s possibilities for action. Thus, the meaning of a door is tied up in its opening and closing (and even more fundamentally, in the reasons for the sake of which I open and close it), and the meaning of “student” is prescribed by the potentialities for action tied up in being a student – going to class, writing papers, etc. But despite the fact that that these potentialities for action are always my own – it is always me who acts, never the door – there is a way in which these meanings tend to prescribe action *for me* rather than the other way around. In being a student, for example, the activities which go along with being a student become routine for me – to the point where I may be going to class and doing work *simply because I am a student*, having lost sight of that *for the sake of which* I am a student in the first place, which is ultimately tied up in my care for myself.⁹² Thus, because for the most part our possibilities are prescribed for us by the common world we inhabit, we all tend towards the same potentialities for action. Moreover, because for the most part I *am* what I do (in terms of my involvements, etc), I am for the most part *not myself* in my everyday dealings with the world.

This might seem an odd claim to make on Heidegger’s part, but if one follows along with him – insofar as what I do is generally prescribed by my common world, that I am for the most part what I do, and that even my mental processes and sense of identity for the most part draw upon this

⁹² According to Heidegger, “care” – for myself, for other Dasein, for things in the world – is the essential aspect of Dasein’s Being that defines it in contradistinction to the Being of any other sort of entity; what makes me human is the fact that I care about my world and the things contained therein.

common world (I am a student, a left-winger, a heterosexual male who plays guitar, etc.) – then I would suggest that there *is* a certain plausibility to his account. The question remains, however: *who* am I then, if for the most part I am not myself? Heidegger’s answer to this question is “*das Man*.”⁹³

According to Heidegger, Dasein is, for the most part, not itself in its everyday dealings with the world – rather, it is the “they-self.” What this means, essentially, is that for the most part I do what “they” do – or, in more idiomatic English, what “everyone” does. I read the newspaper as “everyone” does; I dress, at least to a certain extent, the way “everyone” dresses (or at the very least, avoid dressing in a way that *no one* does); I use equipment and follow certain societal rules just like “everyone” else. Moreover, I don’t consciously think of myself as conforming in this way – and it is in this “inconspicuousness and unanswerability” that “the real dictatorship of the ‘they’ is unfolded.” Heidegger continues: “We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as they shrink back; we find shocking what they find shocking.”⁹⁴ The second to last point here – about the “great mass” – is especially important. According to Heidegger, even the urge to appear as if one is *not* conforming is a tendency of the they-self; because, in a peculiar way, this would make me stand out, and that is precisely what the they-self wants to avoid.

In everyday life, Heidegger writes, “there is constant care as to the way one differs”⁹⁵ from others – and moreover, not from definite others, but from “the others” in the abstract. “One belongs to the Others oneself,” Heidegger writes, “and enhances their power.”⁹⁶ We orient ourselves in our action and appearance with regard to the “averageness” of the they, and thus “level down”

⁹³ Translating *das Man* is a contentious issue among Heidegger scholars. Macquarrie and Robinson translate it as “the they,” but others, including Herbert Dreyfus, have argued that “the one” is a better translation. The basic idea seems to be that in German you can say “*das Man* does so and so” in much the same way that in English we say “they say that it’s going to be a harsh winter” or “one does not talk loudly in the library.” The objection to using “the they” is that for Heidegger *das Man* is a constitutive part of any individual Dasein’s existence – it’s a part of one’s self, not something belonging to other people. I prefer “the they,” however, as it seems to get across the idea that *das Man* is the element of the self that is concerned with what other people are doing – “the One” doesn’t really seem to suggest this.

⁹⁴ *Being and Time*, 164.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 163.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 164.

the possibilities of our Being. In conceptualizing what this “leveling down” means, it might help to consider the following. At any given moment in my life, there is a truly *immense* number of things I might choose to do. I might go for a swim, I might drive my car through a cornfield, I might jump off a cliff, I might go to class wearing lipstick, and so on. But in reality, I almost certainly will not choose to do any of these things. Some of these options – jumping off a cliff, for example – probably just hold no appeal to me; but others – wearing lipstick to class, perhaps – might strike me as attractive options were I not concerned with what “they” might think. Thus, the otherwise staggeringly large number of actions available to me is “leveled down” by the they.

As a result of this leveling down, Dasein is “disburdened” of responsibility by the “they,” and “the ‘they’ accommodates Dasein if Dasein has any tendency to take things easily and make them easy.”⁹⁷ The “correct” course of action in any remotely familiar situation has already been prescribed by the “they,” – and moreover, the way we interpret any situation, and the world in general, is prescribed in the same way (thus, we might interpret situations which are truly *unfamiliar* as being akin to ones we have experienced before, and respond accordingly). If two cars stop at an intersection at the same time, the car on the right has the right of way. If one sees a beggar on the side of the road, there is no need to give him change or even acknowledge his presence. And though one could almost certainly furnish reasons for both of these courses of action, they would just as certainly be superfluous to the real explanation; that this is simply what “they” do.

As long as Dasein’s self has been taken over by the they-self, Heidegger says, Dasein is being “inauthentic.” Etymologically, the German word for “authenticity” literally means “one’s own”; and thus to be “authentic” is essentially related to recognizing “one’s own” potentialities for action, instead of letting those potentialities be dictated by one’s common world. But it’s not, on the face of it, obvious how one can go about acting in an “authentic” manner. As we previously noted, the wholesale rejection of established standards of conduct does not free oneself from the “they”; for

⁹⁷ Ibid, 165.

by doing the opposite of what is conventionally prescribed, one is (ironically) still taking cues from those established standards. Moreover, movements that reject convention in this way and value “authenticity” have a tendency to establish their own quite rigid standards for what counts as being “authentic.”⁹⁸ Authenticity, then, is not possible as a withdrawal from the world or as a rejection of established standards; instead, authenticity must be understood as a way of seizing upon and appropriating things in the world in a way that makes them one’s own.

Truth, Freedom, and Resoluteness

To understand how this can be possible, it is necessary to make a detour into Heidegger’s conception of truth – which will undoubtedly seem something of a non sequitur, but which will seem less so once it is made clear how Heidegger’s notion of truth differs radically from our common sense understanding thereof. Truth, as we typically understand it, lies in the accordance of a proposition with its object; I say “the table is round,” and the truth-value of my sentence depends upon whether the table is, in fact, round or not. But for Heidegger, this answer is insufficient. “Wherein,” he asks, “are the thing and the statement supposed to be in accordance, considering that [they] are manifestly different in their outward appearance?”⁹⁹ This is a question that is tempting to dismiss out of hand in irritation; not because it is invalid; but on the contrary, because it seems perfectly valid and yet impossible to answer. Yet Heidegger, quite characteristically, is not deterred by this seeming impossibility. Truth as “*adequatio rei ad intellectum*,” he writes, can be traced back to “the Christian theological belief that, with respect to what it is and whether it is, a matter, as created, *is* only insofar as it corresponds to the idea preconceived in the *intellectus divinus*, i.e., in the mind of

⁹⁸ The hippie and punk movements, for example, both ostensibly prized “being yourself,” but within a short time established certain prescribed standards of style, language, etc. The rapidity with which this transformation occurred in the latter case is evidenced in a 1978(!) single from the Television Personalities: “I think it’s a shame / That they all look the same / Here they come / la la la la la / The part time punks!”

⁹⁹ Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth” in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 120.

God... and in this sense is 'true.'¹⁰⁰ Thus, in a manner reminiscent of Plato's Forms, each thing in the world has a sort of correspondence in the world of ideas; God first conceived the idea of a "tree" and then created trees themselves, and we can thus judge the statement "this is a tree" by whether the thing indicated corresponds to the idea of a tree, the statement "the tree is green" by whether the tree corresponds to the idea of "greenness," and so on. Furthermore, we can see that statements relate themselves to things in the world by "presenting" those things and by saying how they are "disposed"¹⁰¹ – I say "tree" and evoke the image of a tree, and by saying that it is "green" I refine that image.

The inadequacy of the *adequatio rei ad intellectum*, then, and with the correspondence theory of truth in general, is that once we abandon the notion that things in the world have some sort of built-in correspondence with the ideas of a creator-god or the Forms, one half of the correspondence relationship – what things in the world are supposed to correspond *to* – becomes problematic. The possibility of such a relationship becomes dependent upon the *disclosing* of ideas or meanings to which things in the world can correspond – which amounts to the disclosure of "beings" or "entities" themselves, for without a system of discrete meanings the world would appear only as an undifferentiated mass.¹⁰² Thus it is this disclosing, Heidegger writes, that makes possible the *adequatio rei ad intellectum*, and which "must with more original right be taken as the essence of truth."¹⁰³

But what, then, are we to say about this original disclosing? According to Heidegger, the essence of this disclosing, and therefore of truth, is freedom.¹⁰⁴ Heidegger writes:

Freedom is not merely what common sense is content to let pass under this name: the caprice, turning up occasionally in our choosing, of inclining in this or that direction. Freedom is not mere absence of constraint with respect to what we can or cannot do. Nor is it on the other hand mere readiness for what is required and necessary... Prior to all this

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 118.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 121.

¹⁰² Though perhaps even this says too much; without a world of meaning, it is questionable whether anything would "appear" at all. Perhaps it is safer to say, with Richard Rorty, that "something" would still be "there," and nothing more.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 123.

(“negative” and “positive” freedom), freedom is engagement in the disclosure of beings as such.¹⁰⁵

This understanding of freedom seems so alien to our commonsense understanding thereof that it is tempting to conclude that he is just talking about something else entirely. But Heidegger suggests that what he describes is somehow “prior” to, and thus forms the basis of, our common understanding. How can this be?

The answer to this question lies in Heidegger’s definition of meaning in terms of my possibilities for action – as the “upon-which of a projection [of my possibilities] in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something.”¹⁰⁶ Or as Gertrude Stein once said: “A difference, to be a difference, must make a difference.” The point here is that any disclosure of meaning, any categorical distinction (which amounts to the same thing) must necessarily tell me something about my possibilities for action – or at the very least, about man’s possibilities for action in some conceivable situation.¹⁰⁷ But the *practical* upshot of this point is that anything I do, and moreover my ability to do anything in the first place, is necessarily dependent upon this prior disclosure of meaning (Lee Harvey Oswald, for example, could not have shot John F. Kennedy without a disclosed “aim” in doing so, as well as a whole series of more “nitty-gritty” disclosures; “rifles,” “grassy knolls,” etc.).

My ability to be “free” then, insofar as it is understood as more than “doing what one likes,” (a view ascribed by Aristotle to “those who do not know what freedom is”¹⁰⁸), is dependent upon my ability to *disclose* possibilities through meaning. This freedom is only possible “if we refrain from premature categorizations of what appears”¹⁰⁹ – if we “let beings be” by drawing our

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 126.

¹⁰⁶ *Being and Time*, 193.

¹⁰⁷ Even the most abstract scientific discoveries, I would argue, are only “meaningful” in this way. At the very least, they further our aim to understand and appreciate the universe as it is; moreover, scientific discoveries frequently yield practical applications that are not apparent at the time they are made, and even discoveries about phenomena in the far reaches of space could conceivably prove indispensable in the event that we set out to colonize another planet.

¹⁰⁸ “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, 146.

¹⁰⁹ Peter McInerney, *Time and Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 119.

categories and meanings from the phenomena themselves (“To the things themselves!” as Husserl said), rather than letting the world appear to us through our pre-drawn categories. For the most part, Dasein – under the dictatorship of the “they” – “acquiesces in this or that being and its particular openedness [disclosure],” Heidegger writes, and thus “clings to what is readily available and controllable even where ultimate matters are concerned.” The they-self, then, is not really free (or rather, is constantly fleeing from its freedom); for its possibilities for action have already been disclosed by the public world, and its ability to disclose new possibilities has been closed off. “Freedom,” by contrast, “is the resolutely open bearing that does not close up in itself,”¹¹⁰ and to be free is to suspend one’s categorizations and “learn to exist in the nameless,”¹¹¹ such that we may see the world with fresh eyes and disclose new possibilities for Being.

Freedom and Action

So where has our digression into Heidegger’s phenomenology taken us in our understanding of Arendt and her conception of political action? Perhaps the most obvious link at this point between the work of the two thinkers is the resemblance of Heidegger’s *das Man* to Arendt’s notion of the “the social” in *The Human Condition*, which I will discuss in Part III. But it is Heidegger’s understanding of truth and freedom as “disclosure” that, I think, is of particularly immense value in understanding what Arendt is doing in *The Human Condition* and beyond.

Firstly, Arendt’s reevaluation of the *vita activa* is clearly an attempt to apply the phenomenological method – the suspension of one’s existing categories of meaning – to politics, and it is this unique combination of method and object that makes her work so fascinating and, at

¹¹⁰ “On the Essence of Truth” in *Basic Writings*, 131.

¹¹¹ “Letter on Humanism” in *Basic Writings*, 223.

times, befuddling to interpreters.¹¹² But what are we to make of the inconsistencies between Heidegger's account of truth and her own, which singles out Heidegger as one of the prime offenders in failing to distinguish between "truth" and "meaning?"¹¹³ In a way, the accounts of both thinkers make room for such disagreement. For Heidegger, there is no "final disclosure" which could ever say everything there is to say or be the only way of saying it; no statement that could ever grasp a thing in the entirety of its Being and thus make it "relinquish itself entirely."¹¹⁴ Likewise, truth for Arendt is a property of statements about the world and not of a statement's component meanings; thus, though she argues that we *should* see a distinction between truth and meaning, she would not presumably say that Heidegger's terminology is "untrue." As a result, we can see both Arendt's frequent reproaches against other thinkers for failing to make certain distinctions – between "authority" and "power" and "force," for example¹¹⁵ – as well as Heidegger's similar diatribes as being done with a knowing wink, with a tacit acknowledgement that "all refutation in the field of essential thinking" – thinking that discloses the "essences" or "meanings" of worldly things

¹¹² See, for example, Hanna Pitkin's essay *Are Freedom and Liberty Twins?*, which approaches Arendt's distinction thereof in a way that is fundamentally alien to her methodology. Not that this is by any means bad; on the contrary, it is the collision of different "worlds" in this manner that produces some of the most interesting insights in philosophy and political theory.

¹¹³ See *Thinking*, 15.

¹¹⁴ "On the Essence of Truth" in *Basic Writings*, 121. Note that Heidegger's position, which characterizes truth as neither objective nor subjective (see *Being and Time*, 270) is by no means the same as that of Richard Rorty, who claims that truth is only a property of statements about the world and that there is no criterion by which to distinguish between vocabularies (systems of meaning) aside from their usefulness. Though this stance is to some extent reconcilable with Heidegger and Arendt's in the way I am attempting to reconcile the latter two here, Rorty's account is, I think, significantly more radical in its subjectivism than either of these two thinkers would be comfortable with.

¹¹⁵ See "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future*. Note, however, on page 95, where Arendt both emphasizes her "conviction of the importance of making distinctions," yet castigates the right of thinkers "to retreat into our own worlds of meaning, and demand only that each of us remain consistent within his own private terminology," on the grounds that such a right entails that "If... we assure ourselves that we still understand each other, we do not mean that together we understand a world common to us all, but that we understand the consistency arguing and reasoning, of the process of argumentation in its sheer formality." This statement seems in tension, not only with her later contention that the "meanings" of things are not in themselves true or false, but with her entire body of work, which largely consists of defining words in ways that often differ wildly from our common understanding thereof (her definition of "power" being a prime example). The best way, I think, to understand Arendt's point here is to take her as saying that 1. Words have certain meanings in everyday usage which cannot be entirely passed over in "defining one's terms," 2. One can, in defining terms, be more or less true to the phenomena being described, and 3. An unrestricted right of redefinition leads to the devaluation of language and the loss of a common world, and thus any *substantive* argument must consider whether one's definitions of terms are appropriate or, on the contrary, somehow distort the phenomena they refer to. Altogether then, a somewhat more Heideggerian position than the one she adopts in *The Life of the Mind*.

– ‘is foolish... a lover’s quarrel’ concerning the matter itself.”¹¹⁶ We can then understand both thinkers’ accounts as essentially getting at the same truth, with each having certain strengths and weaknesses in this regard.¹¹⁷

But returning to the matter that led us to these considerations in the first place, Heidegger’s account of freedom and its relation to truth is also extremely useful in clarifying Arendt’s account of action. By interpreting action in terms of *resoluteness* – Heidegger’s “resolutely open bearing” towards Being¹¹⁸ – we can resolve several of the quandaries that have plagued us thus far. Action “transcends” motives, means and ends in the same way that it transcends the sheer givenness of the world more generally – by disclosing one’s *own* possibilities, which may or may not have been previously disclosed by the common world in which one acts. As Heidegger writes, authentic Dasein “does not abandon itself to that which is past, nor does it aim at progress. In the moment of vision authentic existence is indifferent to both these alternatives”¹¹⁹ – both to slavish conformity and to mindless rebellion. Likewise, action begins something *new* because it is not bound in any way to the “innumerable and various rules” that characterize behavior, and thus cannot be predicted by reference to (whether for or against) those rules.

The key distinction to be made between Heidegger’s “freedom” and Arendt’s conception of freedom through action, then, is that that the former is exclusively concerned with the *internal* freedom that makes action possible, whereas Arendt (in her political works at least) only considers

¹¹⁶ “Letter on Humanism” in *Basic Writings*, 239.

¹¹⁷ The utility of Arendt’s distinction between truth and meaning is, I think, evident from our prior discussion; where it perhaps leads us astray, though, is in her contention that meanings – like “enhanced interrogation methods” – cannot in themselves be true or false. This may be true in a sense, but it is also manifestly the case that this phrase in particular, when taken in relation to the phenomena it is meant to describe, is manifestly designed to conceal more than reveal; thus, there is a way in which Heidegger’s definition of truth allows us to denounce such language as being “untrue” in a way that I think is both highly plausible and difficult to account for within Arendt’s framework

¹¹⁸ “Resoluteness” is, in many ways, an awful translation of the German “*entschlossen*,” which is etymologically related to *verschlossen*, which means “closed” or “shut up.” The prefix “ent-” means “away from”; thus, Heidegger’s terminology emphasizes that one is being resolutely *open* in comportment. The English translation loses this meaning, and can in fact be easily taken as meaning the opposite, as a sort of “there are no values, so it doesn’t matter what you do, just pick *something*” – a interpretation that, while incorrect, is perhaps understandable in light of Heidegger’s biography.

¹¹⁹ *Being and Time*, 438.

freedom to be meaningful in its *expression* through worldly action.¹²⁰ This is by no means an unimportant point; but if we were to halt our analysis here, we would nonetheless understand Arendt's project as something like a quaint modification of Heidegger's, an application of the master's method to a novel object – politics. But to do so would seriously misunderstand Arendt's appropriation of Heidegger's philosophy, which is anything but uncritical in nature. Our interpretation thus far serves us perfectly well in distinguishing between action and behavior; Eichmann, to return to one of our previous examples, was clearly behaving under the dictatorship of the “they,” and was in no way engaged in the disclosure of his own possibilities. But how does Arendt's account of action stand in relation to the man who *established* the rules to which Eichmann felt bound to conform; the man who disclosed those possibilities in the first place?

To invoke Adolf Hitler has long been one of those clichéd rhetorical strategies that almost always does more harm than good in furthering a discussion; nonetheless, in this case I feel the question to be entirely appropriate: can Hitler really be said to exemplify “behaving” man in the same way as Eichmann? The answer here, I think, is an unequivocal no. On the contrary, Hitler's “final solution” to the “Jewish problem” redefined what we thought *possible* from humanity; the Holocaust, “in its naked monstrosity,” Arendt once said, “seemed not only to me but to many others to transcend all moral categories and to explode all standards of jurisdiction.”¹²¹ Are we obliged, then, to recognize Hitler as a sort of inverse Eichmann, as a man of action *par excellence*?

The answer on this point is more equivocal, and in fact hinges on a sort of ambiguity in Arendt's account of action. If we take action merely in contradistinction to behavior, as “the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before,”¹²² then it seems as if we are obliged to respond in the affirmative. Arendt herself seems to imply this when she includes fear,

¹²⁰ “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, 145.

¹²¹ “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship” in *Responsibility and Judgement*, 23.

¹²² “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, 150.

distrust, and hatred among the “principles” that may be made manifest through action,¹²³ as well as when she speaks of freedom and action as “the twofold gift” which allows men to “establish a reality of their own” (surely one could find no better description for what Hitler accomplished in Nazi Germany). But in other places, this is *not* all that action entails; indeed, in the same essay Arendt writes that “political institutions... depend for continued existence upon acting men,”¹²⁴ and that “if we understand the political in the sense of the polis, its end or *raison d'être* would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom... can appear.”¹²⁵ Earlier, this statement seemed a sort of perversion of the true nature of politics; now, I think, it has taken on an almost *ethical* significance. Arendt herself would probably not view *The Human Condition* – or any of her other works for that matter – as ethical projects; indeed, in her lecture “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” Arendt argues against the existence of “objective” moral values as they are traditionally understood.¹²⁶ But that does not mean her work is entirely lacking a moral element. Even Nietzsche, that famed “immoralist,” once wrote of Lou Salome that “She told me that she had no morality – and I thought that she had, like myself, a more severe morality”¹²⁷; and any work that sets up something like action as “an end in itself” is necessarily moral, at least in this “more severe” sense. Hence, we must now go beyond our discussion of action as it now stands to discuss this other sense in which Arendt conceives of action; wherein lies her critique of Heideggerian philosophy.

¹²³ Ibid, 151. Note, however, that Arendt goes on to say that “Freedom *or its opposite* appears in the world whenever such principles are actualized” (italics mine), leaving ambiguous what she means by “its opposite” in this case. It seems evident from the context, however, that she is not referring to “behavior.”

¹²⁴ Ibid, 152.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 153.

¹²⁶ See “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” in *Responsibility and Judgement*, particularly pages 104 and 143.

¹²⁷ See “Draft of a Letter to Paul Rée” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1953), 102.

III. The World as Arena for Action

And where do all these highways go, now that we are free?
-Leonard Cohen

In giving a lecture on Division I of *Being and Time*, Hubert Dreyfus once related an encounter with a French professor who characterized the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre as “a brilliant misunderstanding” of Heidegger’s work.¹²⁸ This is an apt characterization for many reasons, perhaps foremost among them the way Sartre and Heidegger approach the issue of human subjectivity. Existentialism, Sartre writes, is the doctrine that “existence precedes essence” – a statement drawn from *Being and Time* – “or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective.”¹²⁹ The fact that Sartre included Heidegger among the “existentialists” in this sense prompted the latter to write a lengthy response titled “Letter on Humanism,” in which he declared, among other things, that this “basic tenet of existentialism has nothing at all in common with the statement from *Being and Time*.”¹³⁰ And setting aside what exactly Heidegger *did* mean by saying that “existence precedes essence,” which is not at all obvious, it is clear enough from what we have already said that he was certainly not a Cartesian in the way of Sartre. In “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger writes that “subject” and “object” are “inappropriate terms of metaphysics, which very early on in the form of Occidental ‘logic’ and ‘grammar’ seized control of the interpretation of language.”¹³¹ Dasein, Heidegger writes, does not relate to the world as a subject knowing objects; if anything, Dasein as Being-in-the-world is the *commercium*, or intercourse, “between a subject present-at-hand and an

¹²⁸ See Dreyfus’ Philosophy 185 - Fall 2007: Heidegger podcast, “Being” available through iTunes.

¹²⁹ See *Existentialism is a Humanism*, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>

¹³⁰ “Letter on Humanism” in *Basic Writings*, 232.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 218.

Object present-at-hand”¹³² which allows such a relationship to exist in the first place.¹³³ Most importantly, Dasein cannot possibly exist as a “free-floating,” Cartesian subject; it presupposes the existence of both a world and the other Dasein who inhabit it. “The world,” Heidegger writes, “is always the one that I share with Others.”¹³⁴ In this way, Heidegger avoids the extreme subjectivity of Sartre’s account, and captures the essential fact that my existence is structured largely by my co-existence with other people.

Or does he? Certainly, Heidegger asserts this bare fact multiple times over the course of *Being and Time*; but is it reflected in the substance of his analysis? Sartre, Cartesianism notwithstanding, devotes large swaths of *Being and Nothingness* to the relations of *l’être-pour-soi* to others. By contrast, Heidegger first discusses Dasein’s “Being-with” in chapter IV of Division I – the shortest chapter in the whole book, taking up a mere seventeen pages in the original German – and moreover, this discussion is directed primarily towards determining the “self” that “Dasein is in its everydayness.”¹³⁵ Here, Heidegger makes the following points: that in encountering equipment in the world, we also become aware of the existence of other Dasein;¹³⁶ that in dealing with “the Other,” we can “leap in” for him and take away his care, leaving him “dominated and dependent,”¹³⁷ or we can “leap ahead” of him and thus give his care “back to him authentically... for the first time”; and finally, that in its everyday dealings Dasein is “proximally and for the most part” not its authentic self, but is rather taken over by the “they.”

¹³² *Being and Time*, 170.

¹³³ Heidegger, I think, is being a bit pedantic though. From a phenomenal perspective, Being-in-the-world does seem to capture our experience as conscious beings better than the Cartesian subject-object relationship; one the features that comes along with such an existence, however, is the ability to adopt a third-person, alienated perspective in conceiving of the world, to which a subject-object relationship seems to correspond rather well. The first perspective may be more primal and, indeed, the condition of the first, but that does not rob the second perspective entirely of its worth, nor make its “refutation” any less “foolish.”

¹³⁴ *Being and Time*, 155.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 149.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 153-144.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 158

Heidegger's analysis of "the Other" through *Being and Time* consists essentially of refinements upon these basic points until we reach Division II, section 74, where Heidegger discusses Dasein's "historizing" – which, for our purposes, can be taken to mean how Dasein, stretching itself along through time, comes to understand itself essentially as the temporally-continuous subject of a life story. Heidegger writes:

“But if fateful Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, exists essentially in Being-with-Others, its historizing is a co-historizing and is determinative for it as *destiny*. This is how we designate the historizing of the community, of a people. Destiny is not something that puts itself together out of individuals' fates, any more than Being-with-one-another can be conceived as the occurring together of several Subjects. Our fates have already been guided in advance, in our Being with one another in the same world and in our resoluteness for definite possibilities. Only in communicating and in struggling does the power of destiny become free. Dasein's fateful destiny in and with its 'generation' goes to make up the full authentic historizing of Dasein.¹³⁸

Such a confusing passage would potentially yield multiple interpretations – perhaps, for example, we could understand “communicating and struggling” as entailing some sort of democratic agonism – if Heidegger had not already made clear his views on democracy and politics in general. I have avoided discussing Heidegger's support for National Socialism thus far because it is, I think, considerably less relevant to most aspects of his philosophy than, say, Thomas Jefferson's ownership of slaves is to his political writings. Here, however, it seems impossible to resolve such an ambiguously worded passage without appeal to biographical evidence. To that end, we may consult the recollections of Karl Löwith, a former student of Heidegger, concerning an encounter between the two thinkers in 1936.

I turned the conversation to the controversy in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* and explained that I agreed neither with Barth's political attack [on Heidegger] nor with Staiger's defense, insofar as I was of the opinion that his partisanship for National Socialism lay in the essence of his philosophy. Heidegger agreed with me without reservation, and added that his concept of "historicity" was the basis of his political "engagement." He also left no doubt about his belief in Hitler...

¹³⁸ *Being and Time*, 436.

There seems no reason to doubt, in light of both Löwith's account and the passage from *Being and Time* excerpted above, that Heidegger's concept of "historicity" did indeed lead him to endorse Fascism.¹³⁹ But *why* did he come to hold such views in the first place? The answer, I think, lies in the fact that Heidegger's entire analysis of "Being-with the Other" is inadequate as such, and wholly fails to grasp what it means to exist in a community with other people.

Perhaps the clearest example of this deficiency in Heidegger's thought can be seen in his discussion of guilt in *Being and Time*. Guilt, as we traditionally understand it, occurs (or at least should occur) when one transgresses against a moral imperative; or as Heidegger puts it, "common sense... knows only the satisfying of manipulable rules and public norms and the failure to satisfy them."¹⁴⁰ As one might expect, however, Heidegger sees these "public norms" as having nothing to do with the authentic phenomenon of guilt. The true nature of guilt, Heidegger writes, manifests itself in the mood of anxiety. Anxiety, on Heidegger's account, is the experience of alienation from the public world, in which the familiar routines and meanings of that world become uncanny (*Unheimlichkeit*, literally "not-at-home" – a phrase that occurs in this literal form frequently in Arendt's writing). In this state, the impotence of these "manipulable rules and public norms" to relieve us of the primordial responsibility we bear for our acts becomes apparent; hence, Dasein is *always* guilty of having chosen one possibility of existence over any of the myriad others available. Heidegger thus formally defines guilt as "Being-the-basis of a nullity."¹⁴¹ Conscience and guilt, then, give no "practical injunctions" or guidelines for action, for in doing so "conscience would deny to existence nothing less than the very *possibility of taking action*"¹⁴²; the very possibility of freedom.

In many ways, Heidegger's analysis here is brilliant. Before we take action, we often seek counsel from others on the right course of action; and even after action has been taken, we often

¹³⁹ Heidegger's infrequent references to Dasein choosing its "hero," which are otherwise quite obscure, perhaps also become more significant in this context. See *Being and Time*, pages 422 and 437.

¹⁴⁰ *Being and Time*, 334.

¹⁴¹ *Being and Time* 329.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 340.

still talk with others, seeking assurance that we “did the right thing.” There is nothing wrong, of course, about seeking guidance before making an important decision. What Heidegger points out, however, is that all too often this behavior is *not* an expression of conscience, of our earnest desire to do the right thing, but rather a *flight* from conscience and the primordial responsibility we bear for our actions. Our terrible fate as human beings is that we *want* to do the right thing, but have no access to any prescriptive code to tell us what that thing might be in any situation. Being authentic, however, requires owning up to that fact, rather than attempting to drown our anxiety in the reassurances of others.

But Heidegger fails to locate the source of our desire to do the right thing, of this “wanting to have a conscience.”¹⁴³ For Heidegger, Dasein’s guilt is solely a function of Dasein’s “Being-the-basis of a nullity,” as well as the primordial indebtedness entailed by being “thrown” into the world – that Dasein “*owes* its existence to something that it is not itself.”¹⁴⁴ But this is an *absurd* account of the origin of guilt, for it completely glosses over the fact that *guilt is only possible when one’s actions affect other people*. Is Robinson Crusoe truly “guilty” in any meaningful sense if he decides to construct his hut out of stone instead of wood? If he decides to have coconut milk with his breakfast instead of water? Perhaps these types of decisions do indeed fill some souls with “fear and trembling”; but I suspect that Abraham – to use the subject of Kierkegaard’s essay as an example – would have been somewhat less stricken by anxiety if God had instructed him to lay a slab of wood upon the altar rather than his second son.

Arendt herself uncritically adopts Heidegger’s solipsistic account in her treatment of conscience as the “two-in-one” dialogue with oneself, which perhaps explains her bizarre treatment

¹⁴³ See *Ibid*, 334.

¹⁴⁴ Arendt, *Willing*, 184.

of it as a marginally political, wholly negative phenomenon,¹⁴⁵ which we previously discussed.¹⁴⁶ For Arendt as well as Heidegger, the standard of conscience “is the self and not the world”; where Arendt rightly takes her leave of Heidegger’s reasoning, however, is in calling this standard “irresponsible.”¹⁴⁷ Heidegger is so bound within the binary framework of authenticity and inauthenticity, of one’s *own* self and the “they-self,” that he cannot possibly conceive of freedom as anything but an individual phenomenon; one can at most help others become free through “communicating and struggling,” but this freedom remains a property of the self, an individual cut adrift from the public world and the dictates of the “they.” The only way these alienated selves can possibly act in coordination is if one supposes, with Heidegger, that these individuals in isolation will tap into a “common destiny”; that each of these individuals will miraculously find within themselves the same voice calling them to the same potentiality for action. Thus, Arendt is utterly correct in calling this a “mechanical reconciliation by which the atomized Selves are provided with a common ground that is essentially alien to their nature,” as well as in concluding that this can only result in “the organization of these Selves... into an Over-self in order somehow to effect a transition from resolutely accepted guilt to action.”¹⁴⁸

The irony here, of course, is that what Heidegger has accomplished is the utter oblivion of freedom in freedom’s name; the submersion of all individual consciences under one will – *literally*, a dictatorship of the “they” – in the name of authenticity. Unable to conceive of how man might live “together with his own kind in the world”¹⁴⁹ without sacrificing freedom, Heidegger resorts to a sort

¹⁴⁵ Arendt herself characterizes Heidegger’s account as a “vehement denunciation” of the “soundless dialogue of me and myself,” claiming that Heidegger views such a dialogue “as an inauthentic attempt at self justification against the claims of the ‘Them’” (Ibid, 185). This in spite of the fact that for Heidegger, authentic conscience manifests itself as a form of silent discourse (*Being and Time*, 316), as a “call” from Dasein in its uncanniness (Ibid, 321), and moreover as one that sounds “something like an *alien* voice” to one’s everyday, inauthentic self (Ibid.). Thus, it is perhaps not so “striking” as Arendt seems to think that Heidegger speaks elsewhere of “the voice of the friend that every *Dasein* carries with it” (*Willing*, 185), because this is entirely consistent with Heidegger’s account of conscience as a form of silent discourse which transpires when one listens to one’s authentic self.

¹⁴⁶ See pages 21 and 22 of this essay.

¹⁴⁷ *Responsibility and Judgement*, 79.

¹⁴⁸ “What is Existential Philosophy?” in *Essays in Understanding*, 181.

¹⁴⁹ “What is Existential Philosophy?” in *Essays in Understanding*, 180.

of crass mythologizing that would not be out of place in Plato's *Republic* – were it not for the fact that the only person duped here is Heidegger himself. Arendt, by contrast, sets out to discover how we might “accommodate the modern sense of alienation in the world and the modern desire to create, in a world that is no longer a home to us, a human world that could become our home.”¹⁵⁰ This world, she tells us, is only possible “insomuch as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use.”¹⁵¹ And while Heidegger would surely agree on this point, it is Arendt who tells us how this must be done; that “in order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech” – a space where men can be free.

Action and the Disclosure of the Self

Our discussion of Arendt's conception of “worldhood” thus far has largely drawn upon *The Life of the Mind*, and thus has given the impression that her conception is merely a derivative, more general version of Heidegger's. Such an impression could not be farther from the truth. In fact, Arendt's earlier writings – particularly *The Human Condition* – present a vision of worldhood that departs radically from Heidegger's; only later did she come to explicitly reincorporate more of his conception into her own. If we consult Günter Gaus' 1964 interview with Arendt, we find the following exchange:

ARENDT: I admit that the Jewish people are a classic example of a worldless people maintaining themselves throughout thousands of years...

GAUS: “World” in the sense of your terminology as space for politics.

ARENDT: As space for politics.

And later in the same interview:

ARENDT: I live in the modern world, and obviously my experience is in and of the modern world. This after all, is not controversial. But the matter of merely laboring and consuming is

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 186.

¹⁵¹ *The Human Condition*, 173.

of crucial importance for the reason that a kind of worldlessness defines itself there too. Nobody cares any longer what the world looks like.
GAUS: “World” understood always as the space in which politics can originate.
ARENDT: I comprehend it now in a much larger sense, as the space in which things become public, as the space in which one lives and which must look presentable. In which art appears, of course. In which all kinds of things appear.

It would be a mistake to conclude from this exchange that Arendt’s conception of “worldhood” prior to 1964 did not incorporate Heideggerian elements. On the contrary, Arendt’s discussion of *homo faber* and the world as “human artifice” in *The Human Condition* bear distinct traces of Heidegger’s philosophy – but here the emphasis is placed on a different aspect of the world, on its *purpose* as a place “fit for action and speech” (a purpose of which Heidegger, of course, had little conception¹⁵²). By the time Arendt wrote *The Life of the Mind* in the late seventies, Arendt was presenting a conception of worldhood that more closely resembled Heidegger’s; this does not mean, however, that she had abandoned her earlier view. On the contrary, the conception of worldhood she presents in these two works is remarkably consistent; the latter is simply not a predominantly political work and thus places no particular emphasis on the world’s political elements. At the time she wrote *The Human Condition* in 1958, however, her intent was precisely to emphasize those aspects of the world, of which any serious consideration is so clearly lacking in Heidegger’s account.

The most radical and important contribution Arendt makes to our understanding of “worldhood” is her discovery that it is not just the meanings of equipment and other things that are disclosed in the world – *people* disclose themselves through word and deed in their dealings with other persons. It is through speech and action, Arendt writes, that “human beings appear to each other, not... as physical objects, but *qua* men.”¹⁵³ Indeed, this is such a fundamental element of human experience that its passing over by Heidegger is dumbfounding; while it is all well and good to point out that pieces of equipment do not appear to us, for the most part, as mere objects with

¹⁵² It should be noted, however, that Arendt’s account of action bears the marked influence of Heidegger’s discussion at the outset of “Letter on Humanism,” particularly in his discussion of freeing action (and thinking) from the technical interpretation as *poiesis* or making. See Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 217-18.

¹⁵³ *HC*, 176.

discernible properties, it seems even more basic to our experience that *other persons* do not appear to us in such a form, but in a mode entirely different from what is either “present-at-hand” or “ready-to-hand.” Indeed, the meaning of who a person is defies “all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression” to an even greater extent than the meaning of concepts like “justice”; “the moment we want to say *who* somebody is,” Arendt writes, “our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is... we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him... with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.”¹⁵⁴ Yet this ineffable sense of personality, our understanding of *who* the people we deal with in our daily lives are, is just as surely disclosed by and known to us as the meaning of any mere thing in the world.

As a result of this disclosure, “the physical, worldly in-between... is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another.”¹⁵⁵ This “web” of human relationships, Arendt emphasizes, “is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common”¹⁵⁶ – on the contrary, Arendt seems right to characterize this world of things as the mere stage, as it were, upon which we act out the stories that emerge from human relationships.

Moreover, just as the disclosure of worldly things occurs against the backdrop of an always previously existing world of meaning, speech and action “always fall into an already existing web” of stories,¹⁵⁷ which constitute an essential element of our shared cultural world.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 181. It is interesting to note that Heidegger’s notion of “resolute openness” towards beings seems applicable here as well. Insofar as we view people in terms of ready-made categories, we are liable to prejudice in our opinions of them; to truly grasp *who* a person is, then, it is necessary to suspend such judgements (“To the selves themselves!” as Husserl might say). Though it would be out of place to discuss the matter extensively at this juncture, this seems a more promising route towards, say, arguing for the injustice of black slavery in the United States, than the ways offered by theorists such as John Rawls and William Connolly in *Political Liberalism* and *Pluralism*, respectively. Both of these theorists attempt to bypass the *truth* of competing moral claims within a body politic, a position that I have argued elsewhere is untenable. If we combine Arendt’s conception of self-disclosure with Heidegger’s notion of truth, however, it seems plain enough what is wrong with white supremacist doctrines: they depend on a untruth similar to that contained in phrases like “enhanced interrogation methods” and “non-enemy combatant,” a falseness that cannot be maintained if one adopts an authentic, “resolutely open bearing” towards people.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 182.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 183

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 184.

But this conception of disclosure through action amounts to more than just a gloss, albeit a very substantial one, on Heidegger's conception of "worldhood." It also amounts to deconstruction of the dichotomy Heidegger establishes between authenticity and inauthenticity, between "one's own" self and the they-self. For contrary to Heidegger's claim that, for the most part, we are "not ourselves" in our everyday dealings in the world, Arendt illustrates that this is plainly *absurd*; for most of our affairs concern other people who we perceive not as faceless members of the "they," but as individuals disclosed in their unique human distinctiveness. However bound to convention a person may be, no matter how much one may even *seek* to expunge all traces of one's individual character, some traces of that individuality – one's "qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings,"¹⁵⁸ as Arendt puts it – will necessarily remain and be disclosed insofar as one acts and speaks.¹⁵⁹

But that is not to say Arendt rejects Heidegger's dichotomy completely, of course; her discussion of "the social" in the *Human Condition* bears, as many interpreters have noted, marked similarities to the "they."¹⁶⁰ Rather, while Heidegger sees authenticity as a rare phenomenon in the face of the tyranny of the "they," Arendt conceives of a framework that is less binary, in which self-disclosure is an activity "from which no human being can refrain and still be human."¹⁶¹ But moreover, there is an essential continuity between Heidegger's notion of authenticity and Arendt's conception of self-disclosure through action – for in order for the latter to occur, *one must be free in the Heideggerian sense*. Though no person ever succeeds in extinguishing all traces of their individual nature, it is self-evident that persons who do not distinguish themselves through speech or action –

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 179.

¹⁵⁹ See, for instance, the character of Syme in *1984* – "Unquestionably Syme will be vaporized, Winston thought again... There was something that he lacked: discretion, aloofness, a sort of saving stupidity. You could not say that he was unorthodox. He believed in the principles of Ingsoc, he venerated Big Brother, he rejoiced over victories, he hated heretics, not merely with sincerity but with a sort of restless zeal, an up-to-dateness of information, which the ordinary Party member did not approach. Yet a faint air of disreputability always clung to him. He said things that would have been better unsaid, he had read too many books, he frequented the Chestnut Tree Cafe, haunt of painters and musicians..." (55).

¹⁶⁰ With the exception that Arendt emphasizes the social's historical contingency, while Heidegger characterizes the "they" as a constitutive (and presumably transhistorical) factor of Dasein's existence.

¹⁶¹ *HC*, 176.

but rather tend to *behave* like everyone else – do not distinguish themselves, though their individuality may become apparent if one takes the time to get to know them “in person,” so to speak. On the contrary, it is those who “stand” or “act out” whose distinctiveness is most apparent; and whether this manifests itself in the former (positive) sense or the latter (negative) one, in either case we get a sense for *who* that person is. A person who cannot disclose new meanings, or at least thoughtfully determine which categories and meanings are most appropriate to a given situation, is disclosed almost as a sort of non-person, liable to mockery at the hands of those who perceive this “mechanical inelasticity.”¹⁶² By contrast, it is those who disclose new meanings and new possibilities through speech and action whose distinctiveness is most apparent; to draw an example from popular culture, lyrical originality in both style and content is so essential to “standing out” in rap music that Lil Wayne goes so far as to claim to be an extra-terrestrial in the song “Phone Home” (“We are not the same – I am a Martian”), while Drake declares in “Lord Knows” that “A lot of niggas came up off a style that I made up / But if all I hear is me then who should I be afraid of?”¹⁶³

The key difference between Arendt and Heidegger’s conception, then, is that Heidegger remains trapped within the dichotomy of an isolated, individual self and the public at large, with no plausible solution for how the former might reintegrate himself into the world. Arendt, by contrast, does not ascribe to this sort of binary opposition – though at the same time, she does seem to view the self-disclosure inherent in speech and action as an increasingly rare occurrence within the

¹⁶² In addition to Arendt’s comments on Eichmann in *Thinking* and “What Remains? The Language Remains,” see Henri Bergson’s essay *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912). In particular see page 11, where Bergson identifies the comic with adapting “ourselves to a past and therefore imaginary situation, when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present,” and page 149, where he writes: “It is comic to wander out of one’s self. It is comic to fall into a ready-made category.” For Bergson, these comic qualities are associated both with absentmindedness and with the extent to which one resembles a “mere machine” (29).

¹⁶³ The rather obvious point here being that by imitating one’s words – the way one discloses meaning through speech – the imitator himself also becomes a semblance of that person.

political realm.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, there does seem to be something disturbing, and perhaps sad, in the fact that though we get an intimate sense of who Lil Wayne is by listening to *Tha Carter 3*, the exact opposite trend is becoming ever more prevalent in the sphere of politics.¹⁶⁵ One might argue, of course, that this loss of disclosure in the public – or at least political – realm is nothing to mourn over; that it is, on the contrary, a sign of progress in the “science” of government. But this would be missing the point; for in banishing action and disclosure from the public realm, we excise all hope of overcoming the Heideggerian dichotomy between the self and the “they,” by making the political arena a space for disclosure and freedom.

Freedom as Deliberative Democracy

The substance of this public – as opposed to private – freedom resides in what Sheldon Wolin aptly calls the “political potentialities of ordinary citizens... with their possibilities for becoming political beings through the self-discovery of common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them.”¹⁶⁶ But what does this mean? We have already characterized action by distinguishing it from behavior and determined that the former differs essentially from the latter in not being bound to established norms or conventions – which in turn are dependent upon a given conceptual framework for conceiving the world. How can this sort of freedom, which seems markedly Heideggerian and individualistic, manifest itself in public?

¹⁶⁴For example, see *On Revolution*, 268, where Arendt speaks of “conspicuous abuses such as the introduction into politics of Madison Avenue methods, through which the relationship between representative and elector is transformed into that of seller and buyer.” *On Revolution* was published in 1963; if this was true then, it is certainly even more true now, to an extent that Arendt could perhaps not even imagine.

¹⁶⁵ Mitt Romney being the obvious contemporary example, though it seems plain that Barack Obama is just as representative of this trend. Perhaps the most telling example here is the fallout over the latter’s notorious statement about economically impoverished voters who “cling to guns or religion,” which prompted such an uproar because it was clear enough to everyone that the President meant what he said – a gaffe of ruinous proportions for a politician in the 21st Century.

¹⁶⁶ Sheldon Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy” in *Constellations* Volume 1, No 1, 1994. Page 11

We might start by noting that all political problems are, at their core, creative in nature. There is no truly political question that can be answered through a mechanical operation or mathematical formula; even tasks that may require intensive calculations of this sort, such as writing tax policy, cannot be resolved *solely* by these methods. On the contrary, the tax code must first be *conceived* and then written down like any other creative endeavor. Moreover, this – as well as any other political problem – requires at least implicitly answering certain fundamental questions, such as *what does our group value?* and *why do we* – as a political body, as opposed to discrete individuals – *exist?* When these problems are posed in an individual context, we call them *existential* questions. When they are asked in the context of a body politic, by contrast, they are called questions of *justice*. To be sure, these two categories are typically not equated in this fashion; to do so, moreover, might strike one as being somewhat irresponsible. Steeped in the vocabulary of enlightenment liberalism for well over three hundred years, the West has come to embrace for the most part the notion that individuals possess a right of “self-determination,” the right to find for themselves what is valuable and meaningful in their lives. But is it not indulgent to talk in this way of the political sphere, where as Arendt so aptly notes, “not life but the world is at stake?”¹⁶⁷ On the contrary, I would argue; where the stakes are higher, so much greater is our duty to own up to the reality of the task that lies before us.

It cannot be denied, however, that justice is rarely framed in the terms I have laid out. It has, however, been framed in just about every other way imaginable. For Plato, justice is a condition of a well-ordered body politic, wherein each element performs – and *only* performs – its appropriate function. Aristotle, by contrast, defines justice in *Nicomachean Ethics* as “complete virtue,” in the sense that justice involves behaving virtuously towards oneself and others, whereas virtue *per se* does not specify to whom it is exercised in relation.¹⁶⁸ Among those who define justice with respect to

¹⁶⁷ “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*.

¹⁶⁸ See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1129b – 1130b.

distribution of societal “goods” (money, power, prestige, etc.), there are those who hold that this should be done on a utilitarian basis (Bentham, Mill), on grounds that are blind to factors without moral desert (Rawls), that any redistribution on the basis of a “patterned” outcome is by definition *unjust* (Nozick), and that it is improper to speak of non-monetary goods as being “distributable” in this sense (Michael Walzer, Iris Marion Young). Communitarians like Michael Sandel, on the other hand, argue that issues concerning rights and justice cannot be resolved without a substantive engagement with moral questions, and thus that justice entails determining “the right way to value things,” prior to “the right way to distribute things.”¹⁶⁹

This is, obviously, a shallow and selective genealogy of justice. Nonetheless, I think it is sufficient to raise the following point: how can it be that all these accounts, which differ so radically in content, are even intelligible as the expressions of the same idea? Sandel, I think, comes closest to furnishing a convincing answer; since the issues we discuss in the context of justice are only decidable on the basis of determining certain common values, this must be what justice is about at its core. But Sandel goes on to argue that this means we must – to put it crudely – hold *more* values in common, which reduces his conception to one specific view among many. What Sandel misunderstands is that the *extent* to which we desire to share certain common values is *itself* a question of justice; that justice itself is fundamentally a matter of conceiving the purpose of the state, of determining the end of politics.

Approaching this question as if it were a matter of factual truth to be “discovered,” as though there were one right answer to be reached through “the theoretical considerations... of one person,”¹⁷⁰ can only lead to utter confusion. And theological niceties aside, what we can be certain of above all in light of the events of the 20th and early 21st centuries is either there is no God, or that at the very least He has been taking a somewhat “hands-off” approach to human affairs now

¹⁶⁹ Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, 261.

¹⁷⁰ HC, 5.

for quite some time. Thus, with no recourse to the two modes by which we are traditionally accustomed to establishing “truth” – scientific discovery and divine revelation – we find ourselves in a world where we have no access to “objective” values by which to orient our conduct; yet where we must also share that world with other people who, like ourselves, desire happiness (in a broad, non-hedonistic sense), and would like if at all possible to avoid a life that is, to use Hobbes’ memorable phrase, “nasty, brutish and short.” But this is no reason to think that there can be no such thing as truth in the realm of politics. On the contrary, it merely points to the inadequacy of our traditional conceptions of truth to a situation in which we find ourselves, as Arendt puts it, “confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protections of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living-together.”¹⁷¹

A more adequate view of “political truths,” I think, is to see these truths as resulting from a creative disclosing of the meaning of things like “justice” and “the state,” of the meaning of politics itself. But here my account has diverged from Arendt’s in two respects. Firstly, Arendt herself never spoke of justice in this way; in fact, she never spoke much of it at all. It is only in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that she discusses justice at any great length; and as one might surmise from the book’s subject, it is framed there in an exclusively retributive sense. This is, needless to say, an extremely narrow way to conceptualize justice; moreover, it is very telling that Arendt grants it this narrow interpretation. For much of what we traditionally discuss in terms of justice falls under the domain of what Arendt would call “the social” – economic concerns that, for her, must necessarily be excluded from the realm of politics. Any serious consideration of the role played by “the social” in Arendt’s thought would stray excessively far from the topic at hand; therefore, I will merely note here that I, along with many other interpreters, think Arendt draws an unnecessarily sharp distinction between “social” and “political” concerns, and that it is impossible to conceive of a

¹⁷¹ Arendt, “What is Authority?” in *Between Past and Future*, 141.

politics which does not in some way implicate the former. Thus, I have no problem using the word “justice” in the way I do here, to capture an element of political life which I think is implied by, but not fully explicated in Arendt’s account.

A more substantive objection, I think, is that Arendt would probably not take kindly to my characterization of politics as a creative act. On the contrary, I suspect that she would vehemently object to this view, which to her would signify a transfer of the violence wrought in the creative act (which belongs to the realm of work) to politics. In doing so, however, I think she would be fundamentally mistaken. The *execution* of any creative act necessarily entails violence; the fitting of raw matter into the mold shaped by consciousness. What we typically think of as the truly “creative” part of any endeavor, however, occurs prior to this violence; it lies in the determination of the “end” itself (for this reason we would not typically call a painting a “creative work” if it consists merely in a duplication of another painting). Insofar as this end is determined by one person – “in the act that founds a political state,”¹⁷² for example – the freedom of the remaining body politic lies in abeyance; their possibilities for “living-together” are no longer their own. Only in the case that every interested citizen actively *partakes* in this creative process – by collaboratively disclosing “common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them,” – is it possible for freedom to be retained in any meaningful sense.

To see what this co-disclosure might look like in practice, let us return to the story of Daniel Ellsberg. The words and actions of Randy Kehler “shattered” (to use one of Heidegger’s favorite phrases) Ellsberg’s thinking; not, moreover, as it pertained to a “world” of equipment, but in his understanding of what it means to be American, of the narrative of our common history and the values realized therein. Ellsberg, we might recall, at first felt deeply proud of his country when listening to Kehler’s speech – *What a good example of an American he is, he thought, the best we have*. His

¹⁷² Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Basic Writings*, 186. Here, of course, Heidegger is taking the opposite view to the one I present here; for him, the founding of truth that occurs in the founding of a political state seems to be the only way that truth can enter into politics.

realization that Kehler was going to *jail* shattered his conception of what America was and where it was headed; it cast into sharp relief the disparity between the principles Kehler manifested in his words and deeds and the failure of his country to live up to those same principles. Whatever Heidegger meant when he spoke of “the power of destiny” disclosed by “communicating and... struggling,”¹⁷³ I think Ellsberg’s story is a more apt manifestation of the truth contained in those words than he could have ever envisioned. For, as Americans for example, we unquestionably *do* share a common destiny.¹⁷⁴ It is a destiny *we choose* through our words and actions – whether we shall live up to the more noble moments of our nation’s history, or whether we shall be doomed to repeat the monstrous follies of our not too distant past. For “every living word fights the battle and puts up for decision what is holy and what unholy, what great and what small, what brave and what cowardly”¹⁷⁵ – and, just as surely, what is American and what not.

The point, then, is that there is an unbroken continuity between the disclosure of the self through action, the forging of one’s unique life story, and the disclosure of meaning that I have chosen to designate with the term justice; the co-discovery of our common values as people, the forging of our unique historical destiny. It is no doubt possible for that destiny to be seized by one person – a “hero,” as Heidegger puts it – but it is foolish to pretend that we can be free as citizens, that we can authentically engage in politics, if this occurs. It takes no philosophical expertise to see that it is our *freedom* as political beings which is seized in this instance; though I think both Heidegger and Arendt’s accounts sharpen our understanding of this robbery. But if we understand the “end” of political action as creating a space for freedom, the question we must ask ourselves is this: what qualities must this space – our common world – possess if this freedom is to be established and

¹⁷³ *Being and Time*, 436.

¹⁷⁴ Not in the sense of “manifest destiny,” but in that our fates are intimately bound together through the interwoven narratives that constitute our common history. It seems appropriate here to also point out that I am not alleging America to be exceptional in this way; rather, it is rhetorically simpler to refer to America rather than the destiny of an abstract, unspecified country.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 169.

preserved? To answer this question, we turn now to the act of constitution-making – the activity which founds the political world.

The Act of Political Foundation

For Heidegger, what we might think of as the “structural elements” of politics seem to have a kind of Being roughly akin to things that are ready-to-hand.¹⁷⁶ The rules, laws and virtues that are determinative of political life, then, are merely expressions of the “dictatorship” of the “they” (unless, of course, they spring from Dasein’s authentic “co-historicizing” in which case they are prescribed by an actual dictatorship). Thus, Heidegger would probably hold something like the view of Ezra Pound – that “the ignorant of one generation set out to make laws, and gullible children next try to obey them.”¹⁷⁷

The closest Arendt comes to Heidegger’s view about the structures of political life is in her discussion of political constitutions. Arendt, however, treats these founding documents in a way that resembles more Heidegger’s conception of language; as a sort of literal structure wherein politics can occur. “Language,” Heidegger writes, “is the house of Being. In its home man dwells.”¹⁷⁸ The idea here seems to be that experiences are only given coherency and structure through language;¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Heidegger never explicitly equates the two; the behavior of the “they,” however, is clearly conceived as a way of treating meanings and rules in the world as “given” in the same way as the meanings of equipment. See, for example, *Being and Time*, page 439: “Proximally and for the most part, Dasein understands itself in terms of that which it encounters in the environment and that with which it is circumspectively concerned... Thus understanding, as common sense, constitutes even the inauthentic existence of the ‘they.’ When we are with one another in public, our everyday concern does not encounter just equipment and work; it likewise encounters what is ‘given’ along with these: ‘affairs’, undertakings, incidents, mishaps. The ‘world’ belongs to everyday trade and traffic as the soil from which they grow and the arena where they are displayed.”

¹⁷⁷ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 205.

¹⁷⁸ “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings*, 217.

¹⁷⁹ For example: “In Japanese culture one can experience the motion of *amae*, a propensity to ‘depend or presume upon another’s love’... Similarly, on the Pacific island of Ifaluk, people experience *fago*, translated by Catherline Lutz as “compassion/love/sadness.” Without a word for these culturally distinct experiences, we seem to either not experience or not notice them; either way, it seems plain enough that our experience is shaped by the words we use to make sense of it. See Jenefer M. Robinson (2004), “Emotion: Biological Fact or Social Construction?” In Robert C. Solomon (ed.), *Thinking About Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

thus, “Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home,”¹⁸⁰ as it is thinking that “builds upon the house of Being.”¹⁸¹ Likewise, Arendt speaks in *On Revolution* of “the revolutionary spirit of the last centuries, that is the eagerness to liberate *and* to build a new house where freedom can dwell.”¹⁸² She returns to the same metaphor later to note that republican politics always occurs “within the framework and according to the regulations of a constitution which... is no more the expression of a national will or subject to the will of a majority than a building is the expression of the will of its architect or subject to the will of its inhabitants.”¹⁸³ It is clear, then, that freedom for Arendt can be found within these sorts of political structures; in the quite literal sense that they provide a *shelter* within which freedom can potentially become manifest.

But there is also a sense for Arendt in which freedom is to be found in the act of foundation itself; indeed, nowhere is her distinction between “work” and “action” more untenable than in this regard. Arendt writes:

To the extent that the greatest event in every revolution is the act of foundation, the spirit of revolution contains two elements, which to us seem irreconcilable and even contradictory. The act of founding the new body politic, of devising the new form of government involves the grave concern with the stability and durability of the new structure; the experience, on the other hand, which those who are engaged in this grave business are bound to have is the exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning, the high spirits which have always attended the birth of something new on earth.¹⁸⁴

Contrary to Arendt’s assertion, these two elements hardly seem “contradictory” unless one is taking great pains to force all reality into one conceptual framework: in this instance, a rigid trichotomy of labor, work and action (clearly, it is the latter two that are in play here). This is not to say that Arendt’s conception of the *vita activa* is not valuable; but here, as elsewhere, she seems to blind

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 259. Cf. Arendt in *On Revolution*, page 212; “For if it is true that all thought begins with remembrance, it is also true that no remembrance remains secure unless it is condensed and distilled into a framework of conceptual notions with which it can further exercise itself... What saves the affairs of mortal men from their inherent futility is nothing but this incessant talk about them, which in its turn remains futile unless certain concepts, certain guideposts for future remembrance... arise out of it.”

¹⁸² *On Revolution*, 25.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 155.

¹⁸⁴ *On Revolution*, 215.

herself by exclusively adopting this perspective.¹⁸⁵ In my view, there is no great leap between the disclosure of the world we find in poetic language and the disclosure of the self in speech; on the contrary, I have argued that there is an unbroken continuity between these two activities. But in many places in her work, Arendt makes the opposite claim; that language is either poetic and world-building or spoken and self-disclosive, with no discernible overlap between these two functions.¹⁸⁶ Likewise, Arendt in *On Revolution* wants to make a distinction between the reified, foundational “structure” of a body politic and the substance of politics itself, which is to be found in action and in its subsidiary faculty of promise-making. This later faculty, which binds a political body “by an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding,”¹⁸⁷ has something of “the world-building capacity of man”¹⁸⁸ in it, Arendt admits. Indeed, wherever “men succeed in keeping intact the power which sprang up between them during the course of any particular act or deed” – which can only be done through “binding and promising” – “they are already in the process of foundation, of constituting a stable worldly structure to house... their combined power of action.”¹⁸⁹

Here, Arendt comes exasperatingly close to admitting the obvious: that the only clear-cut difference between “the regulations of a constitution” and a spoken covenant is that the former is written down; and that indeed, the latter could just as well be written down too. Arendt’s insistence on this (in my mind, conceptually incoherent) distinction is all the more puzzling if one considers that in “What is Freedom?”, Arendt espouses a view nearly identical to the one I am espousing here:

All political business is, and always has been, transacted within an elaborate framework of ties and bonds for the future – such as laws and constitutions, treaties and alliances – all of

¹⁸⁵ This is certainly one of the most persistently perplexing aspects of Arendt’s thought; she creates strikingly original conceptual frameworks which shed new light on hitherto unseen aspects of familiar phenomena, but then adheres to these frameworks (the opposition between the “social” and “political,” for example) even in situations where they seem to obscure more than they reveal.

¹⁸⁶ See *HC*, 169 for Arendt’s discussion of poetry, and page 323n for her contention that the poet’s activity “has nothing in common with the highly questionable and, at any rate, wholly unartistic practice of expression.”

¹⁸⁷ *HC*, 245.

¹⁸⁸ *On Revolution*, 166.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

which derive in the last instance from the faculty to promise and to keep promises in the face of the essential uncertainties of the future.¹⁹⁰

Later in the same essay, Arendt makes an even stronger claim: that men “can establish a reality of their own” through the “twofold gift” of freedom and action. This is, I think, an essential point, for it implies that *the political world both conditions and is conditioned by disclosure through speech and action*. I shall return to this issue later; for now, its principal relevance is that it throws into question the privileging of constitution-making in establishing a space for politics.

But as confusing as Arendt’s treatment of these issues might be, she *does* have a valid reason for wanting to distinguish the act of foundation from other instances of political action; for it is the precepts laid down by this act in particular that do indeed assume a reified, one might even say “ready-to-hand” quality. “The moment promises lose their character as isolated islands of certainty,” Arendt warns, “...that is, when this faculty is misused to cover the whole ground of the future and to map out a path secured in all directions... the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating.”¹⁹¹ Once the binding power of promises has been entirely usurped by a force of an entirely different nature – that of authority – the freedom belonging to political action is lost. For it is the “moral precepts” of mutually binding promises which “are the only ones that are not applied to action from the outside”;¹⁹² the only ones in which we achieve stability without sacrificing the freedom to determine our own potentialities for action. Thus, Arendt wants a politics that is reified to the least possible extent; only to that which is necessary to preserve a space for deliberation.

“Human plurality,” Arendt writes, which is “the basic condition of both action and speech,” has “the twofold character of equality and distinction.”¹⁹³ Both of these qualities, in turn, require that certain worldly conditions be met in order to become manifest. The first condition, Arendt contends, “is necessarily an equality of unequals who stand in need of being ‘equalized’ in certain

¹⁹⁰ “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, 162.

¹⁹¹ *HC*, 244.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, 246.

¹⁹³ *HC*, 175.

respects and for specific purposes.”¹⁹⁴ Thus, this equality is unnatural by definition, as it depends on the human artifice for its very existence. The pre-political “state of nature,” though perhaps not as miserable as Hobbes would have us think, is certainly not a realm inhabited by equals, and it is certainly not a space in which one can speak of “rights” or “laws” in any meaningful sense; for even if there were some sort of “natural law” to which one could appeal, the practical benefits of doing so are less than obvious absent some corporeal body to enforce them.¹⁹⁵ Yet without this unnatural equality, there can be little room for free action and speech – as distinguished from mute acts of violence – in the world. Thus, despite the fact that political truths can never “possess the same power to compel as the statement that two times two make four,”¹⁹⁶ it is the role of the political founding to hold equality as “self-evident,” to use Thomas Jefferson’s immortal phrasing, in order to provide a space within which politics, action, and freedom can appear.

There is no doubt that Western democracies have largely succeeded in establishing and maintaining this unnatural equality, albeit with some shameful exceptions. The tragedy, however, is that the reification of political structures that accompanies political founding rarely stops there; on the contrary, the “lost treasure” of the American Revolution in particular is that “while it had given freedom to the people,” it “failed to provide a place where this freedom could be exercised.”¹⁹⁷ In other words, modern liberal democracies have failed to provide a space for individual distinctiveness to be displayed in politics, an arena for disclosure through political action. This failure, particularly in modern times, is of a twofold nature. Its first aspect is that only the people’s representatives, “not the people themselves,” are given “an opportunity to engage in those activities of ‘expressing, discussing, and deciding’ which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom.”¹⁹⁸ All that can be

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 215.

¹⁹⁵ For a modern day counterpart to this phenomenon, one might perhaps examine the curious domain of what is called “international law”; which, in the absence of an international body to enforce it, has been adhered to rather loosely in recent times to say the least.

¹⁹⁶ *On Revolution*, 185.

¹⁹⁷ *On Revolution*, 227.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

represented in this way, Arendt writes, "is interest, or the welfare of the constituents, but neither their actions nor their opinions."¹⁹⁹ Electoral politics, then, are no substitute for the freedom found in political action.

The second aspect of this failure is that even the representatives of the people find their freedom of action constrained by a variety of different factors. In his book *Profiles in Courage*, then-Senator John F. Kennedy identified three "terrible pressures which discourage acts of political courage";²⁰⁰ the need for representatives to get along with their colleagues, the fear of making decisions unpopular with their constituents, and the pressure of special interests (the conflicting demands exercised by this last group, Kennedy writes, "only reflect the inconsistencies inevitable in our complex economy"²⁰¹ – a testament to the acumen of Arendt's insight regarding the representability of interests but not opinions). The conscientious representative, Kennedy tells us, thus "realizes that once he begins to weigh each issue in terms of his chances for reelection, once he begins to compromise away his principles on one issue after another for fear that to do otherwise would halt his career and prevent future fights for principles, then he has lost the very freedom of conscience which justifies his continuance in office."²⁰²

As a result of these failures, freedom and action tend to lead what Wolin calls a "fugitive" existence in modern democracies, frequently occurring outside the bounds of the state. Arendt considered the acts of civil disobedience perpetrated by the civil rights movement as examples of political action in her time; one might perhaps look at the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements for more recent examples. "It is my contention," she wrote in a 1970 essay, "that civil disobedients are nothing but the latest form of voluntary association, and that they are thus quite in

¹⁹⁹ *On Revolution*, 260.

²⁰⁰ John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, 4. For Arendt's emphasis on the importance of courage in politics, see *HC*, 53-54, as well as "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future*, 155.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 10.

²⁰² *Ibid*, 11.

tune with the oldest traditions of the country.”²⁰³ As Arendt conceived of these groups, they resemble in many ways an ordinary political body before its reification; with the exception that instead of agreeing upon some concept of justice to be administered by the group itself, these groups instead have some concept of what is just – a narrower one, perhaps limited to a single issue – and attempt to effect political change by swaying the opinion of the body politic as a whole.

Thus, political action is possible even if formal political institutions fail to provide an arena for it to be exercised. But what is utterly essential for these groups is that they be given the opportunity to *appear*, and for the distinctiveness of their individual actors to be made manifest. As Arendt writes, “there is all the difference in the world between the criminal’s avoiding the public eye and the civil disobedient’s taking the law into his own hands in open defiance.”²⁰⁴ Thus, it is essential not that the formal political structure, but rather that the world as a whole be a space for disclosure – an arena where political actors can appear in the light of the public realm.

The World and Action

Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else!
-Friedrich Nietzsche

In the summer of 2002, writer Ron Suskind had a curious conversation with an unnamed official within the second Bush Administration:

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."²⁰⁵

²⁰³ “Civil Disobedience” in *Crises of the Republic*, 96.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 75.

²⁰⁵ Ron Suskind, “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush,” *The New York Times Magazine* (October 17, 2004).

This statement is now widely attributed to Karl Rove, and has since become the object of widespread mockery in left wing circles around the United States. This is a shame, I think, because there is very little that is funny about Rove's statement; on the contrary, there is a profound truth in what he is saying. If there is a joke here, it is being had at the expense of the "reality-based community"; and to see why, we must return to Arendt's claim that "men... because they have received the twofold gift of freedom and action[,] can establish a reality of their own."²⁰⁶

The obvious way to interpret this statement is to take Arendt as saying that men alter reality by making physical changes therein; I throw a stone off a cliff, and reality has changed. If this is all Arendt means, then this is a rather banal claim. But there is another way in which we can interpret this statement. Reality, we might recall, only appears to us as it is mediated by a cultural "world of meaning"; a more profound interpretation of Arendt's statement, then, is to take her as saying that men "establish a reality of their own" through speech and action *by changing this world of meaning*. This leads us to an even more striking conclusion, which I alluded to before; not only do the structures of our common world – our political system, for example – determine whether there is a space for speech and action in the public sphere, but that world itself (both in its physical manifestations and in its web of stories and meanings) is disclosed by our words and deeds.²⁰⁷ In other words, *action and the world in which we act are mutually conditioning*. Obviously, we find ourselves at this point dealing with a circle; the only way in which we can understand this mutually constituted relationship, then, is to leap in. Thus, I shall begin by discussing action's conditioning of the world, before turning to the world's capacity to condition speech and action.

²⁰⁶ "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future*, 169.

²⁰⁷ Though it is tempting to ascribe changes in the "physical" world to action and changes in our "world of meaning" to speech, this would be mistaken on two counts. Firstly, I think this is just incorrect (did Jesus' crucifixion truly have no impact on our world of meaning?); moreover, I think the claim itself would be incoherent. One of the consequences of Heidegger's account of Being-in-the-World is that it is impossible to disentangle the world "in itself" from the "world of meaning" that mediates our experience (this is why the best we can hope for in reaching for "the things themselves" is, on Heidegger's account, to disclose meanings that are somehow appropriate to the things at hand). Thus, though I have taken some effort to distinguish between the "physical world" and the "world of meaning" in this section; I would ask the reader to bear in mind that where the world is altered in one respect, a change in the other is never far behind (especially since our "world of meaning" is necessarily action-based – see page 37 of this essay).

Action has a world-building capacity in a twofold sense. Firstly, it creates and maintains the more tangible worldly structures of politics, as exemplified in the act of political foundation. Secondly, the doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words has the capacity to shatter individuals' worlds of meaning; this, in turn, opens up those individuals to new meanings and new possibilities for action. The contemporary relevance of this latter capacity cannot possibly be understated. For the most divisive issues in the United States today are those where the partisans on either side are, in a very real sense, no longer speaking the same language, where words simply do not carry the same underlying meanings for everyone involved in the debate. You say "torture," I say "enhanced interrogation"; you say "abortion," I say "murder"; and so on. I would go so far as to say that *most* truly intractable moral disputes stem from differences in how people understand words' underlying meanings, as well the related issue of which words are appropriately applied to which phenomena. Thus, is it only through the "shattering" effect of speech and action that that we might arrive at a common understanding from which real politics can occur. In one of her many prescient moments, Arendt warned that the real danger the student movement faced in the late 1960s was its "growing infection... with ideologies (Maoism, Castroism, Stalinism, Marxism-Leninism, and the like), which in fact split and dissolve the association."²⁰⁸ Not only have these divisions indeed paralyzed the radical left's ability to act in the decades since Arendt's death, but such ideologies themselves have a paralyzing effect on the thinking of those who follow them. As Elizabeth Young-Bruhl writes in her biography of Arendt:

Anyone thus predetermined [by ideological frameworks] becomes unable to experience directly or concretely as well as unable to reflect back freely on experience. Independent thought is mobile – free in the most elementary sense. For those lacking independence, everything is prepackaged, but such people do not recognize the abstract quality of their thought because they are impressed by the charge they feel in anticipation of actual experiences, upon which they impose a prefabricated language. Among the sixties *moralists* who criticized Arendt and whom Arendt criticized, the most common prefabricated scripts featured violence justified and violence falsely equated with power, which grows up when people join in political action and institutionalize their common efforts. Arendt felt that their scripts closed off the young people to the novel realities of the world historical moment that

²⁰⁸ "Civil Disobedience" in *Crises of the Republic*, 98.

these same young people had created with their moral fervor. Arendt marveled to Jaspers about a member of the German Gruppe 47 who visited with her in Chicago: “Still so young and already totally incapable of learning anything. Sees in everything only more support for his prejudices, can’t absorb anything concrete, factual anymore” (21 May 1966).²⁰⁹

It is the warning contained in this last sentence that provides perhaps the most compelling reason for why the world *must* be maintained as a space for speech and action. Heidegger and Arendt both speak in various places of what Heidegger calls “the danger”; that man will forget his essence as a truth-disclosing being, and become trapped within one “world,” one perfectly closed circuit of prefabricated concepts that allows for no escape. The delusion then arises, Heidegger writes, that “man everywhere and always encounters only himself.”²¹⁰ Arendt and Heidegger both express this fear in the face of modern science and technology; whatever the merits of this concern, this is not the place to consider them. But Arendt also raises this fear in a different setting; under “conditions of mass society or mass hysteria,” she writes, “where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor,” it is possible for people to become “imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times.” The result is “the end of the common world” in any meaningful sense, and the rise of a different sort of world: one “seen only under one aspect and... permitted to present itself in only one perspective.”²¹¹

This danger, of course, is the danger of totalitarianism. But what is striking here is that because of speech and action’s ability to both shatter existing meanings and to disclose new ones, the *danger* of totalitarianism and our power to *resist* that danger *both arise from within action itself*. Adolf Hitler, of course, was renowned and feared for his rhetorical prowess; it was his profound gift in this regard that allowed him to lead Germany down the path that ended in the Holocaust. But Hitler did not do this by himself, and it is here that we are prepared to grasp the other half of the circle I

²⁰⁹ *For Love of the World*, xxvii.

²¹⁰ “The Question Concerning Technology” in *Basic Writings*, 332. Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pages 261 and 266.

²¹¹ *The Human Condition*, 59.

mentioned previously; for the “reality” Hitler established through action was one which *fed back upon itself*. One man alone cannot make a Holocaust; it took the propaganda machine of the Nazi Party to extend Hitler’s grasp until it reached into every aspect of German life; it took the violence of the Night of Long Knives and the *Kristallnacht* to silence those who might have broken that iron grip. Hitler’s words and deeds, in short, created certain worldly conditions; these in turn allowed for the domination of a singular perspective on a scale never before seen in human history.

What Suskind and his ilk have utterly failed to understand, then, is that reality itself is entirely constituted by the interwoven fabric of shared meanings and narratives that make up our common world;²¹² and that this fabric in turn is the singular result of speech and action, as well as the human faculty of thought which underlies them both. To be sure, the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 “shattered” the American experience in a way the Bush Administration could not have possibly anticipated. But once this shattering occurred, the administration wasted no time in filling the void it left behind with new meanings: “regime change,” “non-enemy combatants,” “enhanced interrogation methods,” and so on. These meanings in turn were used to tell a particular narrative: that we were under attack from a culture that hated us for our freedom, that certain individuals and countries were responsible for this attack, that barbaric means were justified by the ends of defeating terrorism abroad and ensuring our safety at home. Avenues by which this narrative could be contested were cut off by stacking press conferences with friendly plants, as well through the advent of completely fabricated events like the infamous “Mission Accomplished” address given by Bush in 2003.²¹³ And even had such avenues been available, the overwhelming fervor of patriotism that permeated American political life in the attacks’ aftermath made dissent nearly impossible; as White House press secretary Ari Fleischer ominously noted, “people have to watch

²¹² See *Thinking*, 50; as well as pages 17 and 18 of this essay.

²¹³ It is telling, I think, that Rove himself typically does not allow question and answer sessions after appearances; such unmediated exchanges are too unpredictable, I suspect, too prone to expose ruptures in the narrative Rove is telling.

what they say and watch what they do” in such times.²¹⁴ The world indeed changed on 9/11; but more importantly, 9/11 cleared a path for even greater changes to come; and the sad irony of this is that the American left merely looked on in incredulity and incomprehension as a new reality unfolded before its very eyes.

This is not, of course, to say that the second Bush Administration constituted as extreme an existential threat to freedom and democracy as Hitler’s Third Reich. Nor is it to say that America has not experienced this totalitarian danger in the past. Arendt herself, in fact, saw such a threat in the “ex-Communist” movement of the 1950s. At that time, Arendt wrote:

America, this republic, the democracy in which we live, is a living thing which cannot be contemplated and categorized, like the image of a thing which I can make; it cannot be fabricated. It is not and never will be perfect because the standard of perfection does not apply here. Dissent belongs to this living matter as much as consent does. The limitations of dissent lie in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and nowhere else. If you try to "make America more American" or a model of democracy according to any preconceived idea, you can only destroy it... In this role, you can only strengthen those dangerous elements which are present in all free societies today and which we do not want to crystallize into a totalitarian movement or a totalitarian form of domination, no matter what its cause and ideological content.²¹⁵

If it is possible to locate a moment in which this totalitarian threat was neutralized, the obvious moment to choose would be the notorious exchange between Senator Joseph McCarthy and Joseph Welch that occurred during the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings. In turning to this is event, the point I wish to make is that in the same way propaganda and fabricated events serve to promote one dominating, totalitarian perspective, unmediated exchanges allow not just for individual disclosure, but for the shattering of this totalitarian, world-building endeavor.

I presume that the reader is already familiar with the context in which the Army-McCarthy hearings took place; thus, I will skip over the extraneous details and begin with the events relevant to our discussion. In response to Welch’s pressing of McCarthy’s associate, Roy Cohn, on the list

²¹⁴ Bill Carter and Felicity Barringer, “A Nation Challenged: Speech and Expression; in a Patriotic Time, Dissent is Muted in *The New York Times* (September 28th, 2001). Fleischer’s was responding to a statement made by Bill Maher that “We [not the 9/11 hijackers] have been the cowards. Lobbing cruise missiles from two thousand miles away. That’s cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building. Say what you want about it. Not cowardly.”

²¹⁵ “The Ex-Communists” in *Essays in Understanding*, 391.

McCarthy claimed to possess of 130 “subversives” within the U.S. Government, McCarthy retaliated by revealing that one of Welch’s associates, who had no connection with the hearing, had belonged to the National Lawyers Guild, an alleged Communist front organization. Welch responded:

Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness. Fred Fisher is a young man who went to the Harvard Law School and came into my firm and is starting what looks to be a brilliant career with us.

When I decided to work for this committee I asked Jim St. Clair, who sits on my right, to be my first assistant. I said to Jim, “Pick somebody in the firm who works under you that you would like.” He chose Fred Fisher and they came down on an afternoon plane. That night, when he had taken a little stab at trying to see what the case was about, Fred Fisher and Jim St. Clair and I went to dinner together. I then said to these two young men, “Boys, I don’t know anything about you except I have always liked you, but if there is anything funny in the life of either one of you that would hurt anybody in this case you speak up quick.”

Fred Fisher said, “Mr. Welch, when I was in law school and for a period of months after, I belonged to the Lawyers Guild,” as you have suggested, Senator. He went on to say, “I am secretary of the Young Republicans League in Newton with the son of Massachusetts’ Governor, and I have the respect and admiration of the 25 lawyers or so in Hale & Dorr.”

I said, “Fred, I just don’t think I am going to ask you to work on the case. If I do, one of these days that will come out and go over national television and it will just hurt like the dickens.”

So, Senator, I asked him to go back to Boston.

Little did I dream you could be so reckless and cruel as to do an injury to that lad. It is true he is still with Hale & Dorr. It is true that he will continue to be with Hale & Dorr. It is, I regret to say, equally true that I fear he shall always bear a scar needlessly inflicted by you. If it were in my power to forgive you for your reckless cruelty, I would do so. I like to think I am a gentleman, but your forgiveness will have to come from someone other than me.

McCarthy, however, continued:

I just give this man’s record, and I want to say, Mr. Welch, that it has been labeled long before he became a member, as early as 1944—

Mr. WELCH. Senator, may we not drop this? We know he belonged to the Lawyers Guild, and Mr. Cohn nods his head at me. I did you, I think, no personal injury, Mr. Cohn.

Mr. COHN. No, sir.

Mr. WELCH. I meant to do you no personal injury, and if I did, beg your pardon.

Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?

The utterly personal nature of this exchange is remarkable; not merely in the sense that the personal life of Fred Fisher was brought onto the House floor, but in the sense that in this dialogue, free of all scripts and handlers and mediating structures, McCarthy’s *self* was disclosed before the

House gallery and the audience watching on their televisions at home. And the person who was disclosed was clearly a despicable man. But moreover, the *principles* McCarthy made manifest in speech and action were made apparent for the first time too; fear, distrust, hatred, and an utter aversion to free thought. The “world” that McCarthy was attempting to create through his actions, a world that manifested these “principles,” a world in which being branded a communist would forever destroy one’s life, was utterly imploded by this exchange; an exchange which was only possible because of the human artifice that placed McCarthy and Welch on equal ground before an attentive audience. This sort of exchange could not have happened at a fabricated media event; it could not have happened without an arena for action. Thus, we can now grasp the full nature of the opposition between the words and deeds of McCarthy, which belong to that totalitarian action which strives to close off the world, and the sort of action which strives to maintain the world as a realm of freedom, as an open space for disclosure. After McCarthy tried once more to press the issue of Mr. Fisher’s membership in the NLG, Welch responded:

Mr. McCarthy, I will not discuss this with you further. You have sat within 6 feet of me, and could have asked me about Fred Fisher. You have brought it out. If there is a God in heaven, it will do neither you nor your cause any good. I will not discuss it further. I will not ask Mr. Cohn any more questions. You, Mr. Chairman, may, if you will, call the next witness.

The House gallery then burst into applause.

Conclusion: Action and Responsibility for the World

Such is the city for which these men fought valiantly and died, in the firm belief that it should never be destroyed... Look at the power our city shows in action every day, and so become lovers of Athens.
-Pericles

Throughout her published work, Hannah Arendt consistently maintained two positions that were very much in tension. The first of these is that there are no objective moral standards or transcendent bannisters for action to be found in the world. The second is that the Holocaust, that horror in which Arendt narrowly escaped being engulfed herself, was one of the most abominable events in the history of mankind. But her account of action, at least in the form that I have somewhat creatively presented it here, does not seem to do much to resolve these tensions. I have spoken of America's "destiny" – is not this "destiny" essentially arbitrary? Have I not in fact admitted the contingency of our tradition, and abandoned – to slightly alter the words of Richard Rorty – the idea that freedom can be justified, and its totalitarian enemies refuted?²¹⁶

Indeed, both our words and deeds would be entirely arbitrary if our destiny were something preordained; if, as Heidegger claimed, our fates are somehow "guided in advance." But this is not the case. I am not denying here our nature as historically conditioned beings; in that respect, our situation is indeed contingent. But our destiny as a nation is something that *we choose*, and this is the utterly essential point. For even though we might, if we are honest with ourselves, be forced to admit that our political values cannot possess a mathematical or scientific or perhaps even a divine grounding, *this does not mean that truth must be banished from politics*. On the contrary; even if adopt a perspective whereby our world seems utterly contingent, I suspect that we will still find that we desire certain aspects of that world to be retained. It is my contention that this desire is not arbitrary; and it is here that Arendt's account can help us understand how this might be so.

²¹⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 53. Rorty speaks here of "liberalism" and not "freedom" – though Rorty's liberalism is hardly our traditional understanding thereof, and in fact bears many similarities to the account I am presenting here. The principal difference between our accounts, of course, is that I reject the proposition that he endorses here.

I have suggested in this paper that there are two senses in which one might understand Arendt's account of action. The first of these is to understand it in opposition to "behavior." What this entails is freedom from the banisters of established norms, such that the concepts that guide our actions – means, motives, ends – are seized upon to disclose our own possibilities, rather than those preordained by the public world. The second sense defines action more narrowly; it is action of the first kind, but that which occurs through deliberation with others in a sort of free, creative process. This kind of action, moreover, strives to create and maintain a space for this public freedom; it is thus opposed to the totalitarian action that wishes to close off the world as a space for disclosure. I would now like to define this second sense of action – the anti-totalitarian kind – as assuming responsibility for the world.

Responsibility is meant here in a multiplicity of senses. Most obviously, it is meant as responsibility to preserve the physical human artifice – as well as the natural world – through action, in the absence of which we might well see both worlds destroyed within our lifetimes. Less obviously, it also entails taking responsibility for one's own "world of meaning" through the solitary act of thinking – which, as Arendt notes in the conclusion to *The Human Condition*, might well surpass the components of the *vita activa* in terms of its "sheer activity."²¹⁷

But most decisively of all, action in this second sense entails taking responsibility for the common world that we share with others. Under this interpretation, our duty is not to preserve the world in just any form, but as a place fit for action and speech; as a house in which freedom can dwell. This means engaging in public discourse about the meanings of the fundamental terms that structure our political life: What are our values? What is our justice? What does it mean to be American? Moreover, this entails not advocacy, not discourse as a *means* to further one's preconceived ends, but truly *engaging* in a collaborative disclosure of the meanings by which we ultimately determine ourselves as a body politic. It requires becoming free for this creative project

²¹⁷ *HC*, 325.

ourselves and, through “communication and struggle” – to appropriate Heidegger’s phrase – helping others become free for this task as well. Finally, taking responsibility in this sense requires throwing oneself into the public sphere, not only to inspire action in others (“One man with courage makes a majority,” as Andrew Jackson said), but so that we might also challenge those who would put an end to this collaborative disclosure; who would close off the world as a space for freedom.

Lacking from these considerations is any argument for why one should assume responsibility in this way, for why one should bother to act in the first place.²¹⁸ This is entirely proper, I think. One of the points that has arisen in our consideration of Arendt and Heidegger is that as free beings, we ultimately bear total responsibility for our actions; no justification for action I could offer would amount to anything but an inconsequential gloss upon this fact. But I do not think it would be inappropriate at this juncture to reflect upon what it means that we find ourselves in this situation.

I have already touched briefly upon Heidegger’s notion of “thrownness”; I return to it now to make the following point. As human beings, our existence is “thrown” in two ways: in the violence of being thrown into a world whose nature is ultimately beyond our control, and in our thrownness unto death, the inexorable return into the nothingness from which we came. This is, to be sure, a distressing situation; what’s more, we find ourselves both “doomed to be free”²¹⁹ (to use Arendt’s somewhat uninspired reworking of Sartre’s famous phrase) while simultaneously bearing total responsibility for actions we undertake with no guidance but that of our fellow men, who of course know nothing more than we do and find themselves in the same distressing condition.

There are, to be sure, innumerable ways in which one might react to this state of affairs; here, I would like to suggest two. The first is to flee before the totality of our situation; before

²¹⁸ I have not given extensive consideration to the pleasure that Arendt alleges to be found in action; perhaps Arendt’s best statement on this matter is in an essay on Sartre and Camus in *Essays in Understanding*: “The disgust with an absurd existence disappears when man discovers that he himself is not given to himself, but through commitment (engagement) can become whoever he chooses to be. Human freedom means that man creates himself in an ocean of chaotic possibilities” (438). The point being that no matter how “alienated” we become from our public world, there is something strange and utterly irreducible in the “shining glory” of great words and deeds that, as Arendt says, generates meaning “as naturally as fabrication produces use objects” (*HC*, 236). See also footnote 79 on page 24 of this essay.

²¹⁹ *Willing*, 217.

freedom, before death, before the contingency of the “world” in which we have been brought up. There is very little to say to someone who wishes to take this route, though it is curious to contemplate how one could deign to do so consciously – generally, when we think of persons “fleeing” in this sense, it is a flight away from such conscious understanding. But, were someone intent on pursuing this course as a deliberate strategy, there is truly nothing that could be said to dissuade that person. As Robert Nozick writes, “Though philosophy is carried on as a coercive activity, the penalty philosophers wield is, after all, rather weak.”²²⁰

At the opposite end of the spectrum, one might choose to embrace one’s thrown existence; this attitude is what Arendt calls *amor mundi*, or “love of the world.” One could understand this to mean loving the world as it is, which would be a rather banal interpretation. A more interesting route is to take *amor mundi* as demanding that we *embrace the human condition*, of which our fundamental freedom is an essential element. It follows, then, that one who loves the world should protect and preserve this freedom through action. Thus, I suspect it is no coincidence that Arendt writes that our self-insertion into the human world through action is “like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.”²²¹

Though I can offer no argument here for why one should take responsibility for the world, or even for why one should love the world, it is my contention here that there is an essential relationship between these two attitudes. Conversely, the totalitarian action that seeks to close off the world seems closely intertwined with the attitude of flight from – and perhaps resentment towards – the human condition. This is, I hope, a not too contentious proposition. What I suspect might be met with more resistance is what I would like to suggest next: that just as freedom is the ground of truth for Heidegger, there is a way in which truth can be taken as the supreme end of freedom in Arendt’s account. This, on its face, sounds baffling and counterintuitive; is not the

²²⁰ *Philosophical Explanations*, 4.

²²¹ *The Human Condition*, 176.

pursuit of Truth the very essence of the totalitarian, means-end action that both Arendt and I reject? But what I propose here is not to posit any particular “truth” as a supreme end; rather, it is to establish and maintain a space for freedom and political disclosure. Moreover, the disclosures that occur within this space are not arbitrary; they are how truth enters the political realm in the first place. To be clear: the disclosures that occur in politics can be essentially deceptive and concealing; but they can also be fundamentally illuminating, and this is the case when disclosure is most in its essence. Heidegger writes in *Being and Time* that:

To say that before Newton his laws were neither true nor false, cannot signify that before him there were no such entities as have been uncovered and pointed out by those laws. Through Newton the laws became true and with them, entities became accessible in themselves to Dasein. Once entities have been uncovered, they show themselves precisely as [the] entities which [they] beforehand already were. Such uncovering is the kind of Being which belongs to ‘truth’.²²²

I have already made clear that I do not think political truths and scientific truths can be unreservedly equated; nonetheless, I think that what Heidegger says here is perfectly applicable to politics as well. The idea that black slaves were somehow “subhuman” depended on a web of meanings – “black” and “white” in particular – that were *fundamentally untrue*, which I have argued is the case with phrases like “enhanced interrogation methods” as well.²²³ Thus, the politics I propose is not one that “is content to call ‘true’ (or ‘right’ or ‘just’) whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be”²²⁴; nor is it a politics of unreserved pluralism. It is one which *demand*s confrontation through speech and action, through the shattering of both our individual and shared worlds of meaning. There is, obviously, a tension here. For the disclosure of truth that I am describing requires an open space in which it can occur – otherwise, we are left with Heidegger’s account of truth in politics, which both destroys individuals’ political freedom and produces “truths” that do not deserve to bear the name. But this account also implies that there must come a

²²² *Being and Time*, 269 (H. 227).

²²³ This, again, cannot be easily accounted for in Arendt’s account, which I think is a critical shortcoming of her conception of truth.

²²⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 67.

time when we can not abide certain practices, such as black slavery, to continue. In other words, there will come a time when we must use violence; but then we must also allow ourselves to feel the full weight of our anxiety, our guilt, our responsibility. We must in other words, as Nietzsche says, invent the justice that acquits everyone except ourselves.²²⁵ Simone de Beauvoir once wrote:

Kierkegaard has said that what distinguishes the pharisee from the genuinely moral man is that the former considers his anguish a sure sign of his virtue; from the fact that he asks himself, "Am I Abraham?" he concludes, "I am Abraham;" but morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning. The problem which we are posing is not the same as that of Kierkegaard; the important thing to us is to know whether, in given conditions, Isaac must be killed or not. But we also think that what distinguishes the tyrant from the man of good will is that the first rests in the certainty of his aims, whereas the second keeps asking himself, "Am I really working for the liberation of men?"

What de Beauvoir says here can aid us in distinguishing the pursuit of Truth from that of disclosure, of the clearing where freedom can appear. For one who pursues the former, the truth is already known and explained; it possess a finality that is appropriate to one who believes in "supreme ends." But there is no finality to truth in the latter sense; it is, and always will be unfolding, and the goal is not to protect (or enforce) any particular truth but to protect the disclosure itself. This leads us to pursue a markedly distinct set of ends. It demands that we consciously take responsibility for the world through word and deed, and that we seek to free others for this endeavor as well. It enjoins us to recognize the freedom that resides in the essential nature of all human beings. Finally, it requires that we oppose totalitarianism; the oblivion of freedom, the pursuit of one end and the one domination of one perspective at the expense of all others, the forgetting of our disclosive nature. Ironically enough, it is Heidegger who almost puts it best; the highest dignity of man's essence, he writes, "lies in keeping watch over the unconcealment – and with it... the concealment – of all essential unfolding on earth."²²⁶ But what makes Heidegger's perspective fatally myopic is that it fails to grasp that "keeping watch" alone will never be enough to

²²⁵ See "On The Adder's Bite" in the first book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

²²⁶ "The Question Concerning Technology" in *Basic Writings*, 337.

preserve freedom. For this task, we must become “lovers of Athens,”²²⁷ as Pericles said in his famed funeral oration; we must become men of action. Or to quote a more recent eulogy:

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground... It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us... that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

²²⁷ Thucydides, *On Justice, Power and Human Nature: Selections from The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 44.