The Relevance of Hannah Arendt's Concept of Freedom to African Political Thought

By

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SUMMARY

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This project is a critical evaluation of the relevance of Hannah Arendt's concept of freedom to African political thought. Freedom is one of the most perplexing aspects of human life, and to determine precisely what freedom consists in is, for most scholars and theorists, hard. What is more, the question of freedom raises fundamental issues about the nature of man. Freedom could be seen as an essential human need and the true mark of humanity; mere survival without that does not constitute a truly human life.

Philosophers and political theorists in postcolonial Africa have for a long time been preoccupied with restoring the lost 'humanity', or identity, of the African people. Nonetheless, the search for identity in itself is futile if it is not in the first place a search for freedom. Arendt (1958) defines freedom as political action: the capacity to begin something new and unexpected; the capacity to break with seemingly automatic processes or continuities. She argues that political action discloses the identity of the agent; it is through action and speech that individuals reveal themselves as unique individuals and disclose to the world their distinct personalities. The question of freedom in Hannah Arendt presents a challenge to modern ways of considering it. Contemporary categories of freedom impede the development of the individual's capacities for agency and action by distorting the distinction between the private and the public spheres and also by adhering to a problematic notion of individuality.

This project evaluates the relevance of Arendt's political philosophy through five major themes: the rise of the modern self from the social, economic and cultural developments in Europe from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century; the ontological foundation of

human rights and the problem of twentieth century political evil; human status and the reality of politics in Africa; the delineation of the public/private spheres; and finally, the redefinition of political freedom. The project takes as its background the political upheavals and violence of the twentieth century, which have been described by some critics as the scourge of modernity. The twentieth century was marked by evil – two world wars, which left people homeless and uprooted; totalitarianism, whose violent population politics led to the annihilation of about six million Jews; and the invention of nuclear weapons. Man would have breathed a sigh of relief at the dawn of the twenty-first century, but as reality reared its ugly head, the transition was a mere passage of time – the elements of the twentieth century political evil are here with us in the present. Twenty-first-century man is horrified at what fellow humans are capable of – at what man may do and what the world may become. For Arendt, it is not a relief that the new millennium offers, but a new opportunity for us to transform elements such as anti-Semitism and racism. This possibility of a new beginning forms the core of Arendt's analysis of human freedom.

Key Words: modernity, totalitarianism, political evil, genocide, public/private, human rights, political action, Arendt, liberalism, freedom.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis hereby submitted for the degree of MA in Philosophy at the University of Pretoria is entirely my own work except where otherwise acknowledged. No part of it has been submitted for examination at any university.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation ascertains the relevance of Hannah Arendt's concept of freedom to African political thought. The modern African political sphere is marred by the remnants of colonialism and neocolonialism, racism (including apartheid) and certain elements of European totalitarianism, such as terror as the new weapon of government. The 'mentality of the colonised' has had a hold on both the rulers and the ruled for a very long time and it continues to manifest itself in the political attitudes of most Africans. The politics of liberation from 'diplomatic' neocolonialism typifies the ideologies of most African leaders in our age. If liberation means to be free from oppression, and if liberty is a condition of freedom, then Africans have indeed been liberated from direct colonialism; but political freedom is an ideal yet to be achieved. So far, the preoccupation of African politics has been to address the socioeconomic needs of the poverty-stricken masses. In other words, biological life, including its reproduction, sustenance, and preservation, remains the highest ideal of politics in Africa. However, biological life exists for the sake of the 'good life' (politics) and not otherwise. As it were, when life becomes the political activity *par excellence,* political evil in the form of state violence and coercion becomes the rule.

Arendt's analysis of the concept of freedom has vital lessons for African politics; yet it has not been exploited enough for the benefit of the African public political sphere. For Arendt, freedom must promote individuality and difference.[1] Yet contemporary politics puts a premium on equality and sameness rather than difference and the potential that difference presents. The very freedom to be different eventually becomes intolerable. By freedom Arendt does not mean the ability to choose from a set of different alternatives (the freedom of choice so dear to the liberal tradition) nor the faculty of *liberum arbitrium* which, according to Christian doctrine, was given to us by God. Rather, by freedom Arendt means the capacity of *initium*, the capacity to begin something new, which is rooted in *natality* – the fact of birth.

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[1] The term 'individuality' is not synonymous with the term 'individualism': individuality refers to the uniqueness of a person in relation to a group (the public). It does not convey the sense of belonging, but it is the essence of difference. The group is necessary for the person to demonstrate his uniqueness through action. Individuality is synonymous with the term 'identity' though the latter is sometimes mistaken for that which places a person within a group of similar persons – the erasure of difference. The term 'individualism' isolates the person from the group. It militates against the virtues of public life and encourages the private pursuit of individual self-interest. Since Descartes's discovery of the *thinking self*, modern man is more individualistic than ever, guarding his private sphere of life against intrusion.

Although action occurs in all areas of life, freedom as action is only demonstrated in the *political* sphere of human activities. Thus, it is a mistake to take freedom as an inner, contemplative, and private phenomenon. We first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves (Yar 2005, p. 7). Freedom is impersonal and it transcends all private notions of freedoms; it is essentially a public phenomenon.

Hannah Arendt is currently very much in vogue, but our view is that her notion of freedom cannot be emphasised enough. A number of leading scholars, notably Seyla Benhabib, Margaret Canovan, Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves, George Kateb, and Dana Villa, have published widely on Arendt's notion of freedom. Arendt is regarded by some scholars as elusive in the sense that she wrote on extremely diverse topics; her works are not constructed on a single argument, but rather on a series of striking conceptual distinctions. How these interconnect depends on the reader. This only emphasises the point that Arendt's notion of freedom always presents room for new perspectives and dimensions. An analysis of the African political experience through Arendt's lenses is one such dimension.

There is not much critique of Arendt's work on political evil and its relatedness to political freedom and human rights. It appears that many analysts have focussed on Arendt's critique of modernity and her analysis of freedom as action merely from a phenomenological point of view, but an investigation of totalitarian tendencies in contemporary politics and how they impact on political freedom is rare. An important example is the centrality of terror as an instrument for carrying out specific political ideology amid the political evils of state repression and limited liberties in today's African politics. The critical subject of freedom is much more relevant in the twenty-first century than it ever was. Despite the fact that Arendt's inspiration comes from the horrors perpetrated in the public realm during her lifetime in Europe, its applicability is not limited by geographical and cultural boundaries.

This research springs from Hannah Arendt's seminal work, *The Human Condition* (1958), especially her distinction of the private and the public realm, and also her detailed discussion of action, even political action. In as much as Arendt's thought has been significantly influenced by outstanding thinkers such as Augustine, Aristotle, Heidegger, Kant, Nietzsche, and Jaspers, her description of the trajectory of *the human condition* remains, in my view, unparalleled. In order to put the subject matter of my project in perspective, the project

makes significant reference to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1978), in which Arendt attempts to make contemporary political phenomena intelligible by tracing their origin back to the eighteenth century. Arendt's *On Revolution* (2006c) takes us further back in history to look at the significance of revolutions and the reason they do not necessarily guarantee freedom. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (2006b) takes us right into Arendt's thoughts on the banality of evil. We also make brief references to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1840) which illuminates our analysis of modern democracy in which sameness and equality are emphasised and man is in turn relegated to the 'herd animal', or prone to be 'lost in the crowd'. This research will be deficient if it does not make at least a brief reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1998). His political philosophy had an enormous influence not only on the people during his time but even now in the twenty-first century.

Chapter One examines the critical role of modernity in the making of the modern self and the privatisation of freedom. It illustrates the trajectory of the human condition from an ancient self capable of *action*, to a modern self stripped of identity and initiative. Modernity, for Arendt, is characterised by the 'loss of the world', by which she means the restriction or elimination of the public sphere of action and speech in favour of the private world of introspection and the private pursuit of economic interests. Modernity began with the glorification of rationality over and above tradition, authority, and religion. Ironically, this relentless rationalism led to the rationalisation of racism, nationalism, totalitarianism, imperialism, and eventually to world wars. Anxiety, uncertainty, loss of meaning about what it is to be human, and so on, describe the predicament of man in modernity.

Chapter Two particularly examines how twentieth century political evil in Europe obliterated the conditions of politics in modernity. It demonstrates the paradoxical connection between national sovereignty and human rights. The events of the twentieth century – wars and totalitarianism – demonstrate conclusively the emptiness and ineffectuality of the discourse of natural rights that heralded the modern republican nation-state. The plight of refugees and, even more, the sufferings of the victims of totalitarian genocide, make clear that 'the Rights of Man', supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state. The Rights of Man failed to secure human dignity. Hannah Arendt proposes a new guarantee for human dignity, which can be found

only in a new political principle – a new law on earth – whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity.

The analysis of political evil leads necessarily to reflections on the nature and place of goodness in politics. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (2006b) and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1978) take us right into Arendt's mind to try to understand her analysis of the problem of political evil and its relation to political goodness, political freedom and human rights. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (2006b) illuminates another important dimension to political evil: the significance of forgiveness in politics. The concept of forgiveness in politics is very central to postcolonial African politics. Africans may try to forgive their colonial masters but our argument here is that, if this forgiveness is not rooted in a proper understanding of the nature of political action, forgiveness may not have the desired effect in the African political sphere. Arendt's exploration of the concept of forgiveness in the face of political evil makes the African political experience intelligible. This forms the point of departure for our analysis of the human status and the reality of politics in Africa.

Chapter Three examines the human status of the African as the ontological foundation for political freedom in the postcolonial African state. It underscores the thesis that unless postcolonial Africans have sincerely come to terms with the past and dealt with it adequately they cannot live politically fulfilling lives. The chapter starts by exploring how the African political sphere is marred by the evils of colonialism and imperialism. According to Nationalist-ideological philosophy, one of the four major trends in African philosophy, true and meaningful freedom, must be accompanied by a true mental liberation and a return, whenever possible and desirable, to genuine and authentic traditional African humanism. Political ideologies like the African Renaissance, which has roots in the ideologies of the then-leading politicians such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Leopold Senghor, seem to be an effort towards the establishment of a valid basis for political action in Africa. Nevertheless, the search for a particularly African identity is an exercise in futility. Identity can only be realised in a political plurality, not prior to it. This chapter also opens up debate on the significance of a proper understanding of political freedom and human rights in Africa. In view of the politics of intimidation and terrorisation in African democracies, civil wars, the extensive violation of human rights, and the problem of refugees, the relevance of Arendt's analysis of freedom to the African political public sphere is not far-fetched.

Chapter Four locates the public sphere as the rightful place for politics. It demonstrates that delineating the categorical distinction between the private and the public is the only way to salvage the public sphere of politics in the twenty-first century. Arendt placed great emphasis on political action in the public realm, and maintained that freedom was characteristic of public rather than private life. The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state; but the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the Modern Age and which found its political form in the nation-state.

Chapter Five redefines political freedom. It demonstrates that action is the unique expression of the human capacity for freedom. Action implies interaction and therefore community. Only in a community can men achieve the manifestation of who they are. A political community therefore is one that enables those who belong to it to manifest their individuality through their interactions with one another. In *The Human Condition* (1958, p.175 ff.), Arendt argues that action discloses the identity of the agents; it is through action that individuals reveal themselves as unique individuals and disclose to the world their distinct personalities. The most significant factor, therefore, that distinguishes man from the other forms of life is not rationality, as we have been made to believe, but action. Freedom, for Arendt, is not an abstract philosophical concept. Rather, freedom demands political action in public; and politics, in turn, demands freedom. Arendt defines the concept of political freedom mainly by contrasting it to several other notions of freedom – above all, to that of free will, which has played a dominant role in the Christian tradition. The notion of free will has traditionally dominated the understanding of politics; but it has done so by misinterpreting freedom as independence and sovereignty.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RISE OF THE MODERN SELF

'Mankind today is "like the cartoon cat that runs off a cliff and for a while is suspended, still running, in mid-air but sooner or later looks down and sees there is nothing under him".'

> – Percy W quoted in Croce, AJ 1988, p. 1.

'Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century? Why does man feel so bad in the very age when, more than in any other age, he has succeeded in satisfying his needs and making over the world for his own use?' wonders Anne Jerome Croce in 'The Making of Post-Modern Man: Modernism and the Southern Tradition in the Fiction of Walker Percy'. According to Walker Percy, the twentieth century has been hard on mankind. Its legacy is aimlessness, lack of purpose, alienation, and bafflement. Percy's graphic portrayal of the human condition in the twentieth century is significant for our discussion of the rise of the modern self. It is, however, no mere happenstance that man has found himself alienated from the world and is now grappling with problems of meaning, identity, and value.

This chapter examines the critical role of modernity in the 'privatisation' of freedom and it puts into perspective the trajectory of the human condition from an ancient self capable of *action*, to a modern private self stripped of identity and initiative. It presents a historical overview of decisive events which marked the beginning of modernity; that is, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and even the revolutionary overthrow of the *Ancien Régime* across Europe and America. Hannah Arendt presents a grim vision of modernity. In *The Human Condition* (1958, p. 248 ff.), she characterises modernity by the 'loss of the world', by which she means 'the restriction or elimination of the public sphere of action and speech in favour of the private world of introspection and the private pursuits of economic interests. Modernity is the age of mass society, of the rise of the "social" out of a previous distinction between the public and the private, and the victory of *animal laborans* over both contemplation and action. It is the age of bureaucratic administration and anonymous labour,

rather than politics and action, of elite domination and the manipulation of public opinion. It is the age when totalitarian forms of government, such as Nazism and Stalinism, have emerged as a result of the institutionalisation of terror and violence. It is the age where history as a "natural process" has replaced history as a fabric of actions and events, where homogeneity and conformity have replaced plurality and freedom, and where isolation and loneliness have eroded human solidarity and all spontaneous forms of living together. Modernity is the age where the past no longer carries any certainty of evaluation, where individuals, having lost their traditional standards and values, must search for new grounds of human community as such.'

Arendt's description of modernity displays a continuing concern with the losses incurred as a result of the eclipse of tradition, religion, and authority – what she calls the Roman trinity. Her description of modernity is impressive; however we will have to look at some specific benchmarks in history and their role in the construction of the modern self. It is important to note that in *The Human Condition* Arendt distinguishes between the modern world and the Modern Age. The Modern Age began in the seventeenth century and came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century, but the modern world – in which we live today – was born with the first atomic explosions (Arendt 1958, p. 6). The world can be defined as the artificial environment of humanly created objects, institutions, and settings that provide us with an abode upon this earth, with a shelter from the natural elements, and insofar as it is relatively stable and permanent, with a sense of belonging, of being at home with our surroundings (d'Entreves 1994, p. 37).

The Beginning of Modernity

Arendt suggests two main stages which mark the beginning of modernity. The first stage of modernity is world alienation and the rise of the social, from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century. In order to understand what this world alienation entails, let us first look at how essential the world is for man. The world provides man with a touchstone of reality since it is lived in common with others. Man's experiences can become objective by being shared, his senses can be confirmed by the testimony of others, and his self-identity can be sustained by inter-subjective acknowledgement (d'Entreves 1994, p. 37). The reality of the world and the self can thus be secured only by sharing our existence with others – by living in a world which is public and common. The most important consequence of the loss of the world is the loss of our sense of being at home in the world and with our identity, our sense of

reality and the possibility of endowing our existence with meaning (d'Entreves 1994, p. 37). For us to live meaningful lives, our human environment must present certain features, such as relative familiarity and relative stability, that enable our expectations to be satisfied in a non-random manner. In other words, the universe (not the world) has to be ordered in a certain way to avoid arbitrariness and chaos in the environment. Foreknowledge or forecasting of future events, let alone planning for the future, would not be possible if there were no order and relative regularity in the universe. Swartz (2004) convincingly argues that we need some kind of regularity in order to make sense of our lives. He demonstrates that we cannot even apportion praise or blame to moral agents if there is arbitrariness in nature. For him, the laws of nature causally determine our actions, not in the sense that the human being has no choice in the matter, but in the sense that the laws of nature are descriptive of the nature of the universe. The 'laws of nature are a subclass of the true descriptions of the world. Whatever happens in the world, there are true descriptions of those events. It is true that you cannot *violate* a law of nature, but that is not because the laws of nature *force* you to behave in some certain way. It is rather that whatever you do, there is a true description of what you have done' (Swartz 2004). It is the need of regularity in the world that compelled Arendt to argue for relative stability and permanence as one of the features that man needs to enable his expectations to be fulfilled in a non-random manner.

The other consequence of the loss of the world in modernity is the lack of a world in common with other people – a shared world. The individual is therefore thrown back upon herself, into the private sphere of introspection, which, being devoid of agreed-upon standards, can never provide secure principles of conduct. World alienation here also means losing ourselves, or losing the faith in our senses and ultimately in our reason (d'Entreves 1994, p. 38). d'Entreves (1994) is right to suggest that this can properly be referred to as self-alienation rather than world alienation as Arendt suggests. Arendt associates the loss of faith in the senses and reason with the rise of Cartesian doubt, with its attempt to ground certainty in a systematic doubting of everything that is given or self-evident. According to Arendt, this doubting led to introspection, since only by concentrating on the self could certainty be achieved, and to the loss of common sense, since experience was now radically 'privatised'. For Arendt, and as we shall see in the next chapter, this condition is conducive to mass manipulation and totalitarian indoctrination.

The restriction or the elimination of the public sphere is yet another consequence of the loss of the world. The public sphere is where words and deeds of individuals can be preserved for posterity and the identity of each disclosed and sustained. The constitution of the public sphere requires that man be at home in the world, but with the loss of the world the framework for public activities can never come into being, nor can man's potential develop. Arendt suggests two main causes of this loss of the world: expropriation and wealth accumulation, which started during the Reformation: 'the deprivation, for certain groups, of their place in the world and their naked exposure to the exigencies of life created both the original accumulation of wealth and the possibility of transforming this wealth into capital through labour. These together constituted the conditions for the rise of a capitalistic economy ... What distinguishes this development at the beginning of the Modern Age from similar occurrences in the past is that expropriation and wealth accumulation did not simply result in new property or lead to a new redistribution of wealth, but were fed back into the process to generate further expropriations, greater productivity, and more appropriation' (d'Entreves 1994, p. 254-5). For Arendt, this dynamic of economic growth destroys all worldly stability and durability; everything becomes an object of production and consumption, of acquisition and exchange, and individuals are forced to concentrate on purely biological needs. All the values attached to the world are sacrificed for the values of labour – life, productivity, and abundance. However, in the later phases of this process of appropriation and wealth accumulation, Arendt argues that, having uprooted people from their land and transformed them into a class of wage-labourers, it then substituted membership in a social class and identity with the nation-state. But with the decline of the nation-state and the integration of the world economy, *mankind* as a whole replaces nationally bound societies, and the *earth* represents the limited state territories. Arendt implies here the concept of globalisation, global village and global citizens. As d'Entreves (1994, p. 39) rightly observes, Arendt views with apprehension this elimination of cultural specificities in favour of a global and undifferentiated society, since in her view men cannot become citizens of the world in the same way as they are citizens of their country, and social men cannot own collectively in the same way family and household men own their private property.

The second stage of modernity, according to Arendt, is earth alienation and the victory of the *animal laborans*. Earth alienation represents an intensification of the trends identified in world alienation above. It was partly induced by the discovery of America and the

subsequent exploration of the whole earth, culminating in the invention of the airplane and the conquest of space. Yet the proximate cause was the invention of the telescope, which, besides destroying man's faith in the senses, established an Archimedean point from which the earth could be viewed as part of an infinite universe (Arendt 1958, p. 257ff.).

While *world alienation* determined the course of modern society, Arendt thinks that *earth alienation* has been the hallmark of modern science (Arendt 1958, p. 11). By abandoning our faith in the senses to reveal reality, and in the capacity of reason to discover truth, we have reached the point where the world and our theories have lost all intelligibility. Arendt sees continuity from the rise of the Cartesian doubt to the most recent developments in quantum mechanics and relativity theory, insofar as they rejected the identity of Being and Appearance, that is, the idea that reality could be disclosed to our senses veridically and that our reason could apprehend the truth. Cartesian doubt doubted the existence of truth itself, and discovered that the traditional concept of truth, whether based on sense perception or on reason or on belief in divine revelation, had rested on the twofold assumption that what *truly is* will appear of its own accord and that human capabilities are adequate to receive it (Arendt 1958, p. 276). The Cartesian doubt has had an enormous influence on modern science. The unsettling philosophical implications of the discoveries of Einstein, Schrodinger and Heisenberg are taken by Arendt as the confirmation of her views about the losses incurred in world and earth alienation (d'Entreves 1994, p. 41). For her, the possibility of understanding what we are doing has disappeared in the modern world and she fears that, with the escape from our earthly condition, the possibility of an emigration of men from the earth to some other planet is no longer far-fetched in our times.

For Arendt, the exclusive pursuit of economic emancipation in itself leads to an expansion of the sphere of necessity. In a world where the values of the *animal laborans* have triumphed, all human activities are reduced to the lowest common denominator – to the task of securing life's necessities and providing for their abundance. What is worrisome for Arendt is not the activity of labour *per se*, but rather its undisputed predominance over all the other activities of the *vita activa*, that is, over work and especially over action. Life itself is very central in the Modern Age and the priority of life over everything else has acquired the status of a self-evident truth. The primacy of natural life over political action is, according to Arendt, the

reason for the transformation and decadence of the political realm in modern societies (Arendt 1958, p. 319).

Alienation of the Self from *Worldly* Reality

The foregoing exposition of Arendt's critique of modernity reveals a critical condition of the modern individual or the modern self. The idea of a unique individual with the capacity for free action, of spontaneously initiating something new in the world, is fundamental to Arendt's political theory. In the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973) Arendt uses the word 'individuality' to name that aspect of our personhood in which the capacity for freedom inheres (May and Kohn 1996, p. 201). It is our individuality that enables us to begin something new out of our own resources. Because of this individuality we have the capacities traditionally associated with human beings – free action and reflective thinking; capacities that make us morally accountable for our actions and that entitle us to personal respect, legal recognition, the rights of citizenship in a body politic. Without this individuality we are less than humans, mere bundles of reactions, determined by the functional requirements of physical survival (May and Kohn 1996, p. 201). The experiments with human nature undertaken by Hitler in Nazi Germany and Stalin in Russia inspired Arendt's fears that it was possible to destroy this individuality in human beings. The phenomenon of individuality was revealed with unusual clarity in the concentration camps because the more familiar aspects of personal identity had been stripped away. Most inhabitants of the concentration camps were denied identity as citizens of a particular country with a legal status and civil rights. Secondly, the inhabitants of the concentration camps were deprived of moral personhood by being made accomplices of the crimes of the regime that had imprisoned them. What remained to these persons was sheer individuality. Arendt argued that this part of the human person was the most difficult to destroy precisely because it depends much on nature and on forces that cannot be controlled by the will (May and Kohn 1996, p. 202).

More often than not, we act on the premise that the self is something well defined, fixed or even transcendent, but as soon as we start thinking about the self it takes on a new shape and appears as something far more complex and contingent. In the Prologue to *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, John Jeffries Martin (2004, p. ix) points out that the ancient Greek oracle, 'know thyself', from Apollo's temple at Delphi, has always invited a search for self knowledge. But what the self is, or is made of, has remained a matter of debate for centuries,

involving not only priests, philosophers, and psychologists but also historians, literary critics, and students of art and art history. Consequently there are varied theories of self that describe what sort of thing the self is, if it is indeed a thing. Similarly there are theories of personal identity that explain why a person, or self, at one time is or are not the same person as someone at some other time. Raymond Martin and John Barresi argue in *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity (*2006, p. 3*)* that one of the earliest indications of interest in the problem of personal identity occurs in a scene from a fifth century play by *Epicharmus*: 'A lender asks a debtor to pay up. The debtor replies by asking the lender whether he agrees that anything that undergoes change, such as a pile of pebbles to which one pebble has been added or removed, thereby becomes a different thing. The lender says he agrees with that. "Well then," says the debtor, "aren't people constantly undergoing changes?" "Yes," replied the lender. "So," says the debtor, "it follows that I'm not the same person as the one who was indebted to you and so I owe you nothing." The lender then hits the debtor, who protests loudly at being abused. The lender replies that the debtor's complaint is misdirected since he – the lender – is not the same person as the one who hit him a moment before. Interestingly, both the debtor and the lender have a point – everyone is changing. Nevertheless, there must be a sense of same person according to which someone can remain the same person in spite of changing.

This chapter proposes neither a theory of self nor a theory of personal identity. While references will be made to the being of the self and its epistemic aptitude, our discussion of the self here is neither primarily ontological nor epistemic, but rather phenomenological. Our working definition of the self is a unified being which is the source of consciousness, the agent responsible for the thoughts and actions of an individual to which they are ascribed. It is a *substance* that endures through time; thus, the thoughts and actions at different moments of time may pertain to the same self. So the questions about whether or not we have an authentic self, or whether the idea of the self is illusive or not, do not arise in the present discussion.

In an attempt to define the modern identity, Charles Taylor (1989) first describes its genesis. The genesis of the modern identity must precede its definition if we are to see any essential differences between modernity and the ancient and medieval eras. He focuses on three major facets of this identity: firstly, modern inwardness; secondly, the affirmation of ordinary life;

thirdly and finally, the *expressivist* notion of nature as an inner moral source (Taylor 1989, p. 3). One of the most important ways in which our age stands out from earlier ones concerns the questions of the meaning of life. A set of questions makes sense to us which turn around the meaning of life and which would not have been fully understandable in earlier epochs. Moderns can anxiously doubt whether life has meaning, or wonder what its meaning is.

The question of the meaning of life is an ancient puzzle. Man's concern about the meaning of life is the truest expression of the state of being human (Klemke 1981, p. 4). The search for life's meaning retains a more powerful hold on modern human beings than ever. In my view, the old adage that 'life is what you make of it' seems to illustrate an important dimension as far as the answer to the question of the meaning of life is concerned. The meaning of life depends on how an individual lives his life and demonstrates his individuality to his fellows. Using Arendt's philosophy, we would argue that action in the public sphere defines one's individuality and attaches meaning to it. Even if the individual dies, he lives on through the actions that he began while sharing the world with others. Some have argued that life has no meaning because it eventually comes to an end. Nevertheless, Sir Karl Popper, seemingly using his principle of falsification, has given the best answer – '... that is if there were no end to life, life would have no value; that is, in part, the ever-present danger of losing it helps to bring home to us the value of life' (Klemke 1981, p. 5).

The question of identity, or '*Who am I?*' is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which one can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what one endorses or opposes (Taylor 1989, p. 27). It is the horizon within which one is capable of taking a stand. People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment; or by the nation or tradition they belong to. These provide the frame of reference within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value. If the people were to lose this commitment or identification, they would not know anymore for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them. This situation does arise for some people in our times – it is called an 'identity crisis', an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of not knowing who they are, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand (Taylor 1989, p. 27). They lack a frame or horizon within which things can take on a stable significance, within which some life possibilities can be seen as good or meaningful, others as bad or

trivial. The meaning of all these possibilities is unfixed, labile, or undetermined – which is a very painful and frightening experience (Taylor 1989, p. 27).

Taylor (1989, p. 112) argues that our modern notion of self is related to a certain sense of inwardness. Being a self is inseparable from existing in *a space of moral issues* to do with identity and how one ought to be –it is being able to find one's standpoint in *this* space, being able to occupy, to be a perspective in it. The Greeks were noted for their injunction '*gnothi seauton*' – 'know thyself' – but they did not normally speak of the human agent as '*ho autos*', or use the term in a context which we would translate 'the' or 'a' self. Our modern notions of inner and outer – or inside and outside – are indeed strange and without precedent in other cultures and times (Taylor 1989, p.113). To say what is distinctive about modernity's conception of the self requires that we compare it to an obvious point of reference: the ancient and medieval conceptions of the same. Ancient writers were perfectly aware that human life had corporeal, relational, and reflective dimensions, even if this awareness was only implicit in what they wrote about the self; even philosophers who believed firmly in the power of rationality insisted that humans were embodied beings (Siegel 2005, p. 38).

The Greek was an individualist, in strong contradistinction to the Roman who generally was conformist to the ideals of the Empire in his attitude. But it is important to note that the Greek's individualism was exercised within the framework of a group, whether that of the city-state or of kinship, cult or locality; the Greek liked both to have a share in what was happening and to engage in rivalry. The fundamental characteristic of the ancient Greek is his strong urge to be master of his fate, which makes him form his own opinion about things around him and shape his life accordingly. He does not underestimate the obstacles he meets and is deeply aware of the human limitations to which he is subject. The Greek is conscious that there exist everywhere about him higher beings, who are nonetheless real for being unseen. They are the bearers of life that fills the whole world. Nevertheless, the Greeks realised that the gods, even Zeus himself, remain within the world and its order, and so their relationship towards the gods is indeed of subordination but not of absolute dependence. In Homer, it is at the very moment Hector is looking certain death in the face and recognising that he has been cheated and betrayed by his gods that he rises to his full human stature. It is not fear that overpowers him; his one thought is: 'Let me not end my life unstriving, unrenowned, But mighty deeds bequeath to generations unborn' (Pohlenz 1966, p. 2).

To mortal man, the gods are able to decree physical death; but even then there is one thing of which they cannot deprive him: the right and the power to act as he himself freely decides. He has no power to modify the outward march of events, but within himself he remains master of his decisions (Pohlenz 1966, p. 2). This conviction is the spiritual soil on which the Greek idea of freedom was able to grow. But it needed time to develop clearly, and it has been realised in history in many different ways. As alluded to earlier, in the introduction, freedom could be seen as an essential human need and the true mark of humanity. Ironically, free men exist only where there are unfree men. Pohlenz (1966) argues that the awareness of freedom could only arise in a place where men lived together with others who were not independent but had a master over them whom they served and who controlled their lives. Even in our time there are people who are comfortable as servants. Historically, with the ancient Greeks it was the existence of the *unfree*, the slaves, that first gave the others the feeling that they themselves were free. When taking leave of his wife, Hector sorrowfully imagines her having to do the menial work of a maidservant in Argos, because a Greek had carried her off, depriving her of the light of day (Pohlenz 1966, p. 4). Here emerges a conception of freedom which presupposes as its counterpart the slavery of the individual, while at the same time showing a consciousness that the freedom of the individual is bound up with the freedom of the community. The chaos caused by war also made them aware how closely their own freedom was closely bound up with the fatherland. The continual danger that they might become enslaved if the fatherland were subjugated inevitably led to the recognition of the freedom of the community as the highest good. The Greeks understood in their struggles with the Persians at the end of the sixth century BC that their struggle was a fight for freedom in the deepest sense, and it was that which gave them the power to conquer. In response to the tempting offer of the Persian Supreme Commander, Mardonius, the Athenians had this to say: 'Well, we know how gigantic is the superior strength of the Persians. We shall   defend ourselves as well as we can, because it is for freedom we fight' (Herodotus VIII, 143).

The Greeks were not inclined to be satisfied with accepting freedom as a gift from the deity, even though their gratitude to Zeus the liberator was deeply genuine, but they believed in an old saying that God helps those who help themselves (Pohlenz 1966, p. 12). On the contrary, modern man, as we shall see later on, is satisfied with freedom as a gift from nature.

Herodotus deliberately portrayed the Greek war as that of liberation. In trying to account for the Greeks' victory over the barbarians' superior power in men and material resources, Herodotus cites the wish for freedom of a people prepared for self-sacrifice, which drove them all to exert themselves to the utmost. Herodotus (VII, p. 135) reveals the deep gulf which separates the Greeks from the Oriental sensibility. When asked by a Persian why the Spartans are unwilling to put up with Xerxes, the two Spartans on their way to be handed over to the Persian king to atone for the murder of Xerxes' envoys respond: 'That you cannot understand, for you only know the life of slaves: you have never learned whether liberty is sweet or not. If you had, you would be advising us to fight for it not with the spear alone but with the axe as well.'

Clearly, freedom for the Greeks was relative freedom. They had over them the law as their ruler, the *nomos*, which they feared more than the Persians, and it is what obliged them to fight. This *nomos* was compatible with freedom for it was the rule of conduct which these men gave themselves. For the Greeks, true freedom does not exclude obligation but rather finds in it the firmness to defend itself against attack from any quarter. This found its complete distinctive expression in the city-state, which in principle conferred on every citizen equality before the law, but required as its counterpart their readiness to give up their lives and property for the community (Pohlenz 1966, p. 15). From then on, the city-state was inseparably bound up with the idea of freedom. It was part of the people's essential character and it distinguished them from the barbarians. Aristotle later on recognised the Greek *polis* as the true state.

The fourth century, however, began to witness a distinct growth in Greek individualism. For instance, sculpture became more introspective, ceasing to try to represent the universal and turning to the particular. Drama showed the same tendency with its increased interest in studying men and not *Man*. Similarly, in philosophy, the central question became 'how ought we to live?' Cynics, Cyrenaics, Stoics, and Epicureans joined in the search for an answer. The Stoics taught interdependence of mankind and, as a consequence, participation in politics as a prime duty for the wise man. But the *polis* was figuring less and less in serious thought; the concept of the *cosmopolis* or world city, which the conquests of Alexander the Great did much to encourage, and of a 'city of Zeus' and the brotherhood of mankind gained influence (Pohlenz 1966, p. 15). Sabine (1973, p. 141) rightly observes that man as a political animal, a

fraction of the polis or self-governing city-state, had ended with Aristotle; with Alexander begins man as an individual.

The achievement of the Greeks is unquestionably of profound historical significance. It is the Greeks who first defined the individual by the capacity to reason. The greatest achievement of the Greek spirit was their rise above magic, miracles, mystery, authority, and custom, and to discover the procedures and terminology that permit a rational understanding of nature and society (Perry 2001, p. 81). Fundamental to their outlook was their belief that human beings could master themselves; they could control their own lives within the order of the universe. The good man, the 'master of himself', has the higher part of the soul rule over the lower, reason over the desires. To be rational is truly to be master of oneself. One who is master of himself enjoys a unity with himself; he is calm, and has a collected self-possession. By discovering theoretical reason, by defining political freedom, and by affirming the worth and potential of human personality, the Greeks broke with the past and founded the rational and humanist tradition of the West. As seen in the remark of the poet W.H. Auden, 'Had Greek civilisation never existed, we would never have become fully conscious, which is to say that we would never have become, for better or worse, fully human' (Perry 2001, p. 82).

The rise of Christianity marked an end to the world of the ancients and ushered in the age of faith. While Christianity also stressed the importance of the individual, the purpose of life shifted: it was no longer to achieve worldly excellence through the development of human personality, but to attain salvation in a heavenly city. In the classical view, history had no ultimate end; periods of happiness and misery repeated themselves endlessly (Perry 2001, p. 140). On the other hand, Christianity taught that history is filled with spiritual meaning. Late antiquity thought taught that there was no authority above reason: individuals had within themselves, through unaided reason, the ability to understand the world and life. Christianity, on the other hand, taught that knowledge without God as the starting point was formless, purposeless, and prone to error. It was the medieval theologian philosophers, or the scholastics, who synthesised Greek philosophy and Christian revelation into an all-embracing philosophy that represented the spiritual essence of medieval civilisation (Perry 2001, p. 205). The scholastics engaged in genuine philosophical speculation but they did not allow philosophy to challenge the basic premises of their faith. The discoveries of reason had to accord with scripture. Although Christian theology incorporated much of Plato's philosophy,

the Christian emphasis on the radical conversion of the will would never be finally accommodated in this synthesis. There were recurrent revolts against Greek or Platonic philosophy, alleging that reason by itself could just as well be the servant of the devil. Martin Luther spoke graphically of reason as 'that whore' (Taylor 1989, p. 115).

Christian and Roman conceptions had combined to create belief in the unity of mankind under a universal law of nature. However, the spread of Protestantism in sixteenth-century Europe broke down the old order of things. Currie (1973, p. 2) argues that the essence of Protestantism is the acceptance by the individual Christian of his direct responsibility to God rather than to the church. Traditional doctrine saw the church as the visible and continuous spiritual society with strong juridical and disciplinary powers for members' correction and guidance. Protestant individualism repudiates the idea of the church as a uniform institution with monitorial functions.

The transition from the medieval period to the modern was neither sudden nor complete, for there are no sharp demarcating lines separating historical periods.[2] However, the period from the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth century through to the eighteenth century Age of Enlightenment constituted a gradual breaking away from the medieval world view: a rejection of the medieval conception of nature, individual, and the purpose of life (Perry 2001, p. 205). Mathematics rendered the universe comprehensible. Science became the great hope of the future. The thinkers of the Enlightenment wanted to liberate humanity from superstition, ignorance, and traditions that would not pass the test of reason (Perry 2001, p. 206). The Renaissance saw the first seeds of many modern developments, but made few radical changes in the political and institutional forms of modern Europe, and certainly they did not abandon them. The Renaissance was evidently a transitional phase in which the seeds of modernity germinated and grew, without reaching the point at which they were a threat or worse to the accepted structures of political society (Toulmin 1990, p. 23). The chief merit of the Renaissance was the respect for the rational possibilities of the human experience; there was also a subtle sensation for the limits of human experience (Toulmin 1990, p. 27). The

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[2] The medieval philosophers understood both nature and society to be hierarchical. The social structure comprised the clergy at the top, who guided society according to Christian standards; these were followed by the lords or the nobility, who defended the society from enemies; at the bottom of the social order were the serfs or commoners, who toiled for the good of all. This hierarchy persisted in most of Europe until the eighteenth century.

political analyses of Machiavelli and the dramas of Shakespeare show the unequalled rich inheritance of the Renaissance times. Seventeenth-century philosophers, however, set aside the long-standing humanist insights of the Renaissance. They were more theory-centred than practical-minded. Procedures for handling specific types of problems, or limited classes of cases, have never been a central concern of modern philosophy: rather, it has concentrated on abstract, timeless methods of deriving general solutions to universal problems (Toulmin 1990, p. 34).

In no centuries has a 'sturdy individualism' been more vigorously proclaimed than in the seventeenth and the eighteenth and by no philosophers more energetically than by René Descartes and John Locke. Yet in the eighteenth century, this same individualism came under attack from the formidable David Hume, and under an onslaught at once philosophical, cultural, and economic, it died in the nineteenth century, in which political thought was for the most part communal in its emphasis. René Descartes (1596–1650) argues that every individual, as a psychological subject, is trapped inside his own head, while the scope of his reflections is limited to sensory input and other data that reach his mind and make him the individual that he is (Toulmin 1990, p. 37). On the other hand, Michel de Montaigne (1580s), a Renaissance humanist, assumed that his own experience was typical of human experience generally. There was no hint of solipsism, like in Descartes's, in Montaigne's reading of experience. He relied on other people's reports, but developed his own account of friendship, and so on, in ways that move freely in a world composed of many distinct, independent persons (Toulmin 1990, p. 37). Both Descartes and Montaigne were strong individualists who saw the first step in the getting of wisdom as lying in self-examination. But their individualism took them in different directions.

When Descartes resolved to reject any knowledge that was passed down to him from previous generations in favour of certain knowledge founded on the indubitable *cogito ergo sum*, little did he foresee the far-reaching consequences of his new-found method. Using the *cogito ergo sum* he is pretty certain that the thinking subject exists, then from that he infers the existence of the body. Departing from the prevalent Christian belief in the unity of the human being, i.e. the soul/mind and matter, Descartes declares that the mind and body are exclusively separate. What attracted Descartes to this extreme dualism was that it left nature free for the mechanical explanation of natural science and the mind to idealism, or to the Church. The

two relative substances, mind and body, exclude each other: mind cannot cause changes in the body and body cannot cause changes in the mind. The mind-body dualism has significantly influenced all philosophical theorising to date.

In terms of Descartes's dualism, the self is conceived as a non-physical subject of experience, essentially distinct both from its physical embodiment and its place in a meaningful order of nature. The self is no longer defined or constrained by an essential purpose, as it was the case with previous generations. The characteristic self of modern philosophy is an abstract and disembodied subject of consciousness. For Descartes the connection between a self and a body can only be a non-essential and an accidental one. Those features of a human being deriving from its physical embodiment are merely accidental or contingent features of a self that is essentially disembodied. By implication, purpose and meaning can no longer be derived from our place in an ordered cosmos. The self must find its own purpose, the meaning of its existence, from within itself. Descartes is rightly dubbed the father of the modern obsession with the self.

A Disenchanted World

The world of the modern period is significantly disenchanted. Nature is nothing more than a mechanistic system of extended matter without religious or moral significance. Our knowledge of this disenchanted world no longer provides unequivocal or immediate support for either morality or religion. On the contrary, ancient culture gave access to a resource of which many moderns have deprived themselves – namely the belief that the world, like the self, is structured so as to fulfil intelligible moral ends, 'to subserve the ends for which man exists' (Siegel 2005, p. 51). Aristotelian science maintained that all things tend towards some natural end, but most of the seventeenth century scientists were guided by the principle that such teleology must always eventually be explained in terms of underlying microstructures of an entirely mechanical nature. René Descartes banished teleology from science and envisaged a unified grand style of explanation based ultimately on the universal laws of mathematical physics that governed the behaviour of all natural phenomena, celestial and terrestrial alike (Cottingham 2003, p. 8). Since then the job of the scientist has been to subsume all observable events under the relevant mathematical covering laws; and in respect of these laws, there was no attainable answer to the question *why*. Science has advanced so spectacularly and with such an accelerated pace in the twentieth century that we may be

tempted to suppose that given a bit longer it could even succeed in explaining why we are here and what our existence means. Sharing in this view is a distinguished contemporary scientist, Stephen Hawking: 'Up to now, most scientists have been too occupied with the development of new theories that describe *what* the universe is to ask the question *why* … However, if we discover a complete and unified theory combining quantum physics with general relativity … we shall all … be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason …' (Cottingham 2003, p. 4).

Plato once argued that human beings do not have the same degree of rationality. Consequently, the ascendancy of reason over and above religion, authority, and tradition, puts too high a standard of judgment for the human being. Moreover, the human mind is boundless when it comes to thought (reason) – thus, it is possible to hit the farthest extremes of thought ever imaginable. We are aware of how reason hit the doldrums in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. Reason alone, which is abstract, is not sufficient therefore to solve all the problems of human life as the *philosophes* imagined. No matter how science aims to provide as complete and comprehensive a description as it can of the universe, no matter how successful and unified the theory it ends up with, it cannot explain *why there should be something rather than nothing*. From a scientific perspective, it seems nothing in the observable universe could really answer this. Any solution to this riddle of existence is supposed to lie outside the phenomenal world. But is this not the limit of science?

There is a rich tradition of religious language, both in the Western culture and elsewhere, which grapples with the task of addressing what cannot be fully captured by even the most scientific account of the phenomenal world (Cottingham 2003, p. 8). Throughout human history religion has remained one of the ways in which human beings have found meaning and purpose to their lives. Albert Einstein asserted bluntly that 'to know an answer to the question of the meaning of life means to be religious' (Cottingham 2003, p. 10). Sigmund Freud also insisted that the idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system (Cottingham 2003, p. 10). Conversely, Freud himself argued that the moment a man questions the meaning and the value of life, he is sick; belief in God is based on an infantile response – the terrifying feeling of helplessness in childhood arouses the need for protection which is provided by a loving father, even an omnipotent and omniscient father (Cottingham

2003, p. 10). According to Cottingham (2003, p. 12), meaning might be either exogenous or endogenous: someone might find their life meaningful insofar as it conforms to the will of a transcendent creator who is the ultimate source of value and significance. Others may find it within their being, constructing it from the inside as a function of their own choices and commitments.

We are not trying here to propose a religious awakening for scientists and non-theists to consider belief in an omnipotent God if they are to find meaning in the world. What is of interest for the present discussion is how modern man, more than his predecessors, is obsessed with the question of the meaning of life. With the rise of the social and the glorification of life in modernity as the only thing that has value, it comes as no surprise that man should 'be the measure of the value of life'. With the destruction of the public and the private spheres and the flourishing of the activities of life, man tries, however unsatisfactorily, to satisfy his search for meaning by engaging in fleeting and 'mortal' pleasures of modernity: the glorification of the body and its appearance, the love of fashion, the preoccupation with the sensual in modern day advertising, mediated (or internet) networking sites, and so on, all point to the unfortunate fact that man is on the search for meaning and identity in a meaningless world.

Some religious thinkers reject the Modern Age for its espousal of secular rationality, which was the central legacy of the Enlightenment. These thinkers argue that reason without God degenerates into an overriding concern for technical efficacy – a mind which produced Auschwitz, Stalin's labour camps, weapons of mass destruction, and the plundering and polluting of the environment (Perry 2001, p. 664). The self without God degenerates into selfish competition, domination, exploitation, and unrestrained hedonism. Critics of the Enlightenment urge the reorientation of thinking around God and transcendent moral absolutes, without which liberal democracy cannot resist the totalitarian temptation or overcome human wickedness (Perry 2001, p. 664). Conversely, defenders of the Enlightenment heritage caution against devaluing and undermining the achievements of the West, which are among others: the tradition of rationality which makes possible a scientific understanding of the physical universe and human nature, the identification of irrational and abusive institutions and beliefs, the tradition of *political freedom* which is the foundation of democratic institutions, the tradition of inner freedom which asserts the individual's capacity

for ethical autonomy, the tradition of humanism which regards individuals as active subjects with both the right and the capacity to realise their full potential, and the tradition of human dignity which affirms the inviolable integrity and worth of the human personality (Perry 2001, p. 665).

The French Revolution of 1789 was, as it were, the practical expression of the ideals of the Enlightenment. Despite the tumult and confusion, the Revolution posed philosophic questions of the highest order. The ancient edifice of power-privilege was dismantled at a ferocious pace in favour of liberty and equality. Those who lived through the Revolution were sure there had never been a time like it before. The French Revolution was a time of creation and discovery (Kishlansky 1993, p. 590). It was the most outstanding bourgeois revolution ever in that its achievements were uniquely threefold: it was a revolution of liberty, of equality, and a revolution for unity. The essential feature of the French revolution was the successful establishment of national unity through the destruction of seigneurial regime and the privileged feudal orders. According to de Tocqueville in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, the revolution's basic aim was to sweep away the last vestiges of the Middle Ages. Most importantly, it culminated in the establishment of liberal democracy.

Some of the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment which were realised in the French Revolution are the emancipation of the human person from superstition and tradition, the triumph of liberty over tyranny, the refashioning of institutions in accordance with reason and justice, and the tearing down of barriers to equality. Perry (2001, p. 316) argues that never before had people shown such confidence in the power of human intelligence to shape the conditions of existence. On the other hand, the Revolution also unleashed two potentially destructive forces identified with the modern state: total war and nationalism. It brought conscription and the mobilisation of all the state's resources for armed conflict. This new development in warfare was terribly fulfilled in the world wars of the twentieth century. Another potentially destructive force was the revolutionary mentality, which demolished an unjust traditional society and created a new social order that would restore individuals to their natural goodness. In its extremism, this vision justified mass murder in the name of a higher good, especially in the twentieth century Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia (Perry 2001, p. 346).

Eighteenth century French aristocrats, like their medieval forebears, viewed society as a hierarchy in which a person's position in life was determined by his or her inherited status. By championing the ideals of liberty and equality, the French Revolution undermined the traditional power structure – king, aristocracy, and clergy. By advocating the rational and secular outlook of the Enlightenment, the French reformers further dismantled the religious and political pillars of traditional society (Perry 2001, p. 366). While a revolution for liberty and equality was sweeping across France, sending shock waves throughout Europe, a revolution in industry was transforming life in Britain. Both individualism, which had its roots in the Renaissance and the Reformation, and the tradition of reason to understand and control nature gave Europe a tremendous advantage in the invention and adoption of new technology (Perry 2001, p. 350). Most notable during this time were the changes in social structure: the Industrial Revolution destroyed forever the old division of society into clergy, nobility and commoners.

George Rude, a historian of the French Revolution, says that revolutionary movements require 'some unifying body of ideas, a common vocabulary of hope and protest, something in short, like a common "revolutionary psychology"' (Perry 2001, p. 320-321). For this reason, many historians see a relationship between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Even though the *philosophes* were not revolutionaries themselves, their attacks on the pillars of the established order helped to create revolutionary psychology (Perry 2001, p. 321). Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political philosophy, for instance, had an enormous influence on the French and American revolutions, and on the subsequent tradition of liberalism. His conception of democracy, founded on the forcible imposition of the general will, flourished and was actively followed until the late twentieth century (Magee 1998, p. 129). In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau declares that man is born free but is everywhere in chains. Civilisation (or society) for him seems to be a setback to man's freedom. Rousseau considered the state as it was then constituted to be unjust and corrupt. It was dominated by the rich and the powerful who used it to further their interests, whereas the weak knew only oppression and misery. Rousseau condemned arbitrary and despotic monarchy, the divine-right theory of kingship, and the traditional view that people should be governed by their betters – lords and clergy – who were entitled to special privileges (Perry 2001, p. 298). Rousseau introduced three revolutionary ideas to Western philosophy: first, that civilisation is not a good thing – we need to civilise civilisation by allowing our natural insights to rule;

second, that feelings should replace reason as our guide to life and our judge; third, that a human society is a collective being with a will of its own that is different from the sum of the wills of its individual members, and that the citizen should be entirely subordinate to this general will (Magee 1998, p. 126). Civilisation tends to go against natural instincts and to teach people certain values to which they must conform if they are to fit into society. So for Rousseau, whether in our public or private lives, everything must meet the requirements of feeling and natural instincts and not reason.

Rousseau's ideas offered a fundamentally different conception of democracy from Locke's. For Rousseau, and in line with his third idea above, the mainspring of his idea of democracy is the forcible imposition of the general will on people. For Locke, on the other hand, the mainspring of his model of democracy is the protection and preservation of individual freedom. There is a seeming *ignoratio elenchi* in Rousseau's line of thought. From his exposure of the danger of civilisation and from his premise that everything in our lives should meet the requirements not of reason but of feeling and natural instincts, Rousseau should not have ended up forcing the general will on people. He should not have ended up forcing people to be 'free' through the general will. Using his belief in the power of feelings and natural instincts over reason, it would have made much sense if Rousseau argued that men should *work out* their individual freedom.

Rousseau rebelled against society's unbearable pervasion of the human heart, an intrusion upon the innermost region in man, which until then had no special protection. To him both the intimate and the social were subjective modes of human existence. It is the mode of the intimate which Rousseau endeavoured to protect by declaring that the freedom of an individual has to be respected, and not interfered with. Arendt (1958, p. 39, 40) regards Rousseau as the first articulate explorer and even to an extent a theorist of intimacy.

In conclusion, the Modern Age has seen a number of rebellions against the moral philosophy of reason. Rational self-mastery may eventually be self-domination or enslavement. There is a 'dialectic of enlightenment' in which reason, which promises to be a liberating force, turns into its opposite. Taylor (1989, p. 115) argues that we stand in need of liberation from reason. In fact, most of the above achievements seem to be more theoretical than practical. Besides, the evils of modernity, even political evils, are largely a consequence of the glorification of

rationality over and above tradition, authority, and religion. To be sure, the promise of the Enlightenment has not been achieved. As Peter Gay observes: 'The world has not turned out the way the *philosophes* wished and half expected that it would. Old fanaticisms have been more intractable, irrational forces more inventive than the *philosophes* were ready to conjecture in their darkest moments. Problems of race, of class, of nationalism, of boredom and despair in the midst of plenty have emerged almost in defiance of the *philosophes*' philosophy. We have known horrors, and many know horrors, that the men of the Enlightenment did not see in their nightmares' (Perry 2001, p. 310). At the end of the nineteenth century, the process of fragmentation in European thought and arts accelerated after the Second World War: philosophers, writers, and artists increasingly expressed disillusionment with the rationalist-humanist tradition of the Enlightenment (Perry 2001, p. 588). They no longer had confidence in either reason's capabilities or human goodness, and they viewed perpetual progress as an illusion.

In the decades shaped by world wars and totalitarianism, intellectuals raised questions that went to the heart of the dilemma of modern life: 'How can civilized life be safeguarded against human *irrationality*, particularly when it is channeled into political ideologies that idolize the state, the leader, the party, or the race? How can individual human personality be rescued from a relentless rationalism that organizes the individual as it would any material object? Do the Enlightenment values provide a sound basis on which to integrate society? Can the individual find meaning in what many now regard as a meaningless universe?' (Perry 2001, p. 590).

It is against the above background of the human condition in modernity that we can better understand why political ideologies like totalitarianism became popular in the twentieth century. Filled with anxiety and uncertainty about the future, people desired a type of government which would protect them from any future wars and their resultant misery. Little did it occur to the already perplexed masses that such ideologies were bent on further dehumanising them and making them incapable of any political action. The next chapter examines twentieth century political evil in the form of national sovereignty and the failure of human rights to protect human beings.

CHAPTER TWO

HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICAL EVIL IN MODERNITY

'... whereas the Greek experience of wonder was rooted in the experience of beauty, the experience of wonder today – if not engaged in a flight from reality – is rooted in the experience of horror at what humans are capable of – speechless horror at what man may do and what the world may become ...'

> – Arendt 1954, quoted in Birmingham 2006, p. 7

'Human rights violations usually reflect a calculated (or manipulated) pursuit of political power, not inherent evil or ungovernable passions ...'

> – Gurr 1984 quoted in Brysk A (ed.) 2002, p. 4

The exploration of the rise of the modern self in the previous chapter has established that the twentieth century was hard on mankind, so much so that modern man no longer knows what it means to be human or what the purpose of life in general is. This chapter particularly examines how twentieth century political evil in Europe obliterated the conditions of politics in modernity. It further demonstrates the paradoxical relationship between political evil, in the form of national sovereignty, and human rights.

Loss of Human Dignity through Totalitarian Domination

In the words of Eric Hobsbawm (quoted in Gellately and Kiernan 2003, p. 3), the twentieth century was an 'age of extremes'; 'with two world wars in one generation, separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions ... [and] the anticipation of a third world war ...' (Arendt 1968, p. vii). Hannah Arendt describes this anticipation as like the calm that settles when all hopes have died. 'We no longer hope for the eventual restoration of the old world order with all its traditions, or for the reintegration of the masses of the five continents who have been thrown into chaos produced by the violence of the wars and revolutions and the growing decay of all that has been spared. Under the most diverse conditions and disparate circumstances, we watch the development of the same phenomena – homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth' (Arendt 1968, p. vii).

'The violence of the twentieth century is reflected not only in the number and intensity of wars ... but in the radical and violent population politics – the categorisation and then the internments, deportations, killings, and ultimately, genocides of defined population groups' (Weitz quoted in Gellately and Kiernan 2003, p. 53). Some critics see in the violence of the twentieth century the scourge of modernity, the nefarious underside of Western societies since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The breadth and depth of the violence could be explained by modernity's defining features, the combined force of new technologies of warfare, new administrative techniques that enhanced state powers of surveillance, and new ideologies that made populations the choice objects of state policies and that categorised people along the strict lines of nation and race (Weitz quoted in Gellately and Kiernan 2003, p. 54). In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that National Socialism and the Holocaust represent the fulfilment of the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment (Weitz quoted in Gellately and Kiernan 2003, p. 54). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt locates the horrors of the age in the racism that developed in tandem with the new imperialism of the nineteenth century, in the rise of the 'mass society', and in the dissolution of a classically defined and limited political sphere – all markers of the age of modernity (Weitz quoted in Gellately and Kiernan 2003, p. 53).

The two world wars had ferociously demonstrated how great a burden mankind is for man. According to Isaac (1996, pp. 61-73) 'the scientific power of humanity had issued in technologies of mass destruction and global annihilation. The economic power of humanity had produced a truly global economy ... governed by forces blind to problems of human security and dignity. The political power of humanity had produced a world of competitive nation states concentrating human allegiances and mobilising enormous human energies into causes that were all too often exclusivist and hostile. In the face of these terrifying feats of human initiative, what seemed most obvious and most disturbing, was ... the frailty of humankind, the vulnerability of humans who have created an enormously complex, interdependent world and now must learn to assume responsibility for living together in this world.'

Humanity is ironically the element that both unites and terrorises humans. Birmingham (2006, p. 7) argues that with the deepening of our knowledge of others, we recoil all the more

from the ideal of humanity. When purged of all sentimentality, the ideal of humanity demands that we assume political responsibility for all crimes and evils committed by human beings. Herein lies the predicament of political responsibility – political responsibility (not the moral or legal responsibility) inherent in the ideal of humanity (Birmingham 2006, p. 7). The ideal of a common humanity places upon man the burden of political responsibility for political evil.

A New Guarantee for Human Dignity and Human Rights

Hannah Arendt argues that a philosophically invalid and politically impotent notion of human rights was responsible for the twentieth century atrocities. The events of the twentieth century – wars and totalitarianism – demonstrate conclusively the emptiness and ineffectuality of the discourse of natural rights that heralded the modern republican nation-state. The plight of refugees and, even more, the sufferings of the victims of totalitarian genocide make clear that 'the Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable ... whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state. Deprived of citizenship, the stateless were deprived of more than their home, property, and political status; the most fundamental deprivation was the loss of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective' (Isaac 1996, p. 63). In short, they were deprived of their basic human dignity; of their ability to function as moral and political agents, enjoying security and freedom among their fellows, experiencing the mutual recognition that only citizenship confers. 'The survivors of the death camps attest that abstract nakedness of being nothing but human was their greatest danger. Shorn of law and convention, treated as a purely "natural" creature – a beast – man was left naked and shivering, a vulnerable, miserable creature, prey to hostile forces' (Isaac 1996, p. 63). Arendt's political theory centres around the problems engendered by the failure of the rights of man to secure human dignity – even trans-historical dignity, a dignity that applies to humans as such, one that is universally valid and not appropriate only for certain individuals or societies or historical epochs (Isaac 1996, p. 64). Arendt argues that 'human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities' (Isaac 1996, p. 61 quoting Arendt 1973, p. ix). To what extent does Arendt's reformulation of the principle of humanity provide a new guarantee of human dignity and human rights?

Human rights, as they are stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, seem to be ineffective when it comes to the protection of individual persons from national sovereignty. In the event that the right of a nation to sovereignty comes in conflict with the human rights of the individual person, the former overrides the latter and individual human beings 'in their nakedness', stripped of the protection of law and political community, become *rightless*. As it were, at the very moment when the protection of human rights is desperately needed, no such protection is granted. When the human status of man is thus undermined, particularly by political powers that be, we have occasion for political evil. Political evil consists in this capacity of political authorities to subdue the human capacity for political action, thus obliterating the very condition for meaningful politics. Totalitarian regimes – including their modern variants that masquerade as liberal democracies – are the perfect embodiment of political evil.

What is poignant is not only the fact that human rights lack a proper guarantee, but also that the subject or the bearer of universal human rights is not the individual person, as we may wish it to be, but rather an abstract human being that seems to exist nowhere. This is why *particularist* applications of human rights to concrete persons are usually overridden by more 'general' motives such as the 'good' of the nation. Nonetheless, in the Preface to *Philosophical Theory and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (2003), William Sweet describes the twentieth century as 'the century of human rights – of their massive violation, but also of humanity's increased recognition of them. From the *Declaration of the International Rights of Man*, adopted by the Institute of International Law during its session at New York on 12 October 1929, to the recent discussion of the establishment of an International Court of Justice, the notions of "right" and "human rights" can no longer be said to be creatures of a rarefied philosophical discourse. They are part of the basic vocabulary of people and peoples throughout the world – particularly those who struggle against tyranny and oppression'.

Contemporary human rights theorists understand human rights in terms of individual agency and self-determination, in the framework of Hobbes and Rousseau. Human rights are believed to be inalienably possessed by sovereign subjects who are the bearers of rights. Ignatieff (2001, p. 57) suggests that 'human rights is a language of individual empowerment,

and empowerment for individuals is desirable because when individuals have agency, they can protect themselves against injustice. Equally, when individuals have agency, they can define for themselves what they wish to live and die for.' For Ignatieff, to emphasise agency is to empower individuals, but also to impose limits on human rights claims themselves. As it were, human rights belong to self-interested rational agents for whom freedom is understood in terms of a general, though not total, lack of hindrance in pursuing self-interested goals.

Arendt's critique and reformulation of the modern understanding of human rights rests in large part on a critique and reformulation of the notions of freedom and agency, which lie at the very heart of the modern human rights discourse (Birmingham 2006, p.36). According to Arendt, the liberal tradition, with its paramount concern for freedom and justice, neglects the politically fundamental rights of citizens. 'We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights as well as the right to belong to some kind of organised community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation' (Birmingham 2006, p. 36). Arendt argues that humanity itself must guarantee the right to have rights, or the right of every individual to belong to humanity. 'For Arendt, the common origin of humanity lies not in any naturalistic beginning but in the archaic beginning that makes the event of natality. This original event that provides the universal principle of humanity is, paradoxically, at the same time the origin of unpredictable singularity. In other words, this event carries with it the principle of solidarity even as it gives birth to the singular and the unique.'[3]

Arendt insists that human dignity needs a new guarantee because its old guarantee, the nineteenth century Kantian idea of a *cosmopolis* of peaceful republics respecting the natural rights of man, has been destroyed. The faith in moral agency has been shattered by the complicity of so many in the evils of the century and by the indifference of so many more to these evils. The confidence in the republican nation-state as the repository of the rights of man had been undermined by the experience for three decades – 'the Inglorious Thirty Years' – of the most civilised nations on earth destroying cultures and peoples in the name of their

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[3] Whereas the doctrine of race seems to deny the very possibility of a common humanity, Arendt's principle of natality carries with it both the principle of solidarity due to the fact that we are all basically human, and the principle of difference, which has given rise to racial differences.

sovereignty and then ignoring the plight of the suffering in the name of a concern with their own.

Human Dignity: what does it mean?

Schachter (1983, pp. 848-854) points out that 'the "dignity of the human person" and "human dignity" are phrases that have come to be used as an expression of a basic value [of humans] accepted in a broad sense by all peoples. "Human dignity" appears in the Preamble of the Charter of the United Nations as an ideal that "we the peoples of the United Nations" are "determined" to achieve. The second paragraph of the Preamble reads: 'to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.' The term dignity is also included in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.'[4]

The meaning of the 'inherent dignity of the human person' is not explicit in international instruments or national law. Its intrinsic meaning has been left to intuitive understanding, conditioned in a large measure by cultural factors ... in concrete situations ... a violation of human dignity can be recognised even if the abstract term cannot be defined. 'I know it when I see it even if I cannot tell you what it is' (Schachter 1983, p. 849). In one of the formulations of the categorical imperative, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) advocated that every human being ought to be treated as an end, not as a means. Schachter (1983) follows Kant to suggest that respect for the intrinsic worth or dignity of every person should mean that individuals should not be perceived or treated merely as instruments or objects of the will of others. Charles Malik, head of the Commission which wrote the *Declaration of Human Rights* made the concept 'person' a far more attractive term to those who feared the radical separatism and potential lawlessness suggested by the concept 'individual' (Novak 1999, p. 39-42). Novak (1999, p. 39-42), whom I have quoted at length, elucidates the term 'person' and how dignity inheres in her:

> "A cat or a dog, even a tree, can be an individual, but only a human being (or God and the angels) can be a person. Person is far more specific to the human race; it is a far

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[4] We will discuss the origin of the belief that man is born free and has reason and conscience a little bit later.

more humanistic term. What makes a person a person, rather more than merely an individual, is a spiritual capacity: the capacity to reflect and choose, to be imaginative and creative, to be an originating source of action ... Moreover, persons are reared over long years in families, and it is in families that their identities, habits, and character are established. Families further participate in whole networks of kin, neighbourhood, religious tradition, and other intermediate associations, natural and civil, and in and through those relations live out a thick social identity. In this sense, societies take shape long before states do. Persons are social beings before they are aware of having their own distinctive personalities. Persons come to fulfilment only in community, and communities have as their end and purpose the raising of persons worthy of their inherent dignity. Dignity inheres in them because they are destined to be free to reflect and to choose, and thus to be provident over the course of their own lives, responsible for their own actions. A person is capable of insight, love, and long-term commitment. Such creatures are deserving of respect from other rational creatures. Their inherent nature makes civilisation possible, since civilisation is constituted by conversation, the art of persuasion through reason and mutual respect.

These characteristics of person give rise, in turn, to the four main principles whose force is felt in every one of the thirty principles of the Declaration: Every human being without exception is worthy of dignity, liberty, equality, and brotherhood. In other words, *the very term person implies a vision of a universal society*, which for reasons of practicality and local autonomy, and by the natural workings of culture and history, is organized through countless local associations of varying sizes and horizons" (Novak 1999, pp. 39-42).

From the very first words of the Preamble, then, the Universal Declaration avoids the term 'individual' and takes care to surround the term 'person' with references to the expanding circles of communities and associations in which in the real world actual persons become aware of their own capacities, responsibilities, rights, and obligations, and in which they find information about their human possibilities and their rights, in addition to moral and institutional support in vindicating them. In the Declaration are articles about the person and courts, the person and the family, the person and intermediate institutions, the person and religious or cultural traditions, the person and ethnic groups, the person and the state, the person and the international order (Novak 1999, p. 39-42).

Perry (1998, quoted in Elshtain 1999-2000 p. 53), like many others, provides a different justification of the basis of human dignity. He claims that human dignity inheres in the foundational claim that the human being is sacred. The dignity of the human person is a necessary prior assumption from which rights derive (Elshtain 1999-2000, p. 53). Glendon (1999, p. 2-3) tells of how Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz mused ruefully about 'those beautiful and deeply moving words which pertain to the old repertory of the rights of man and the dignity of the person ... I wonder at this phenomenon because maybe underneath there is an abyss. After all, these ideas had their foundation in religion, and I am not overoptimistic as to the survival of religion in a scientific-technological civilisation. Notions that seemed buried forever have suddenly been resurrected. But how long will they stay afloat if the bottom is taken out?' Is the universal rights idea merely based on a kind of existential leap of faith, or does it have some sturdier basis?

Glendon (1999, p. 3) also reports that 'as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1998, there was a barrage of attacks upon its aspiration to universality – mainly in the name of cultural relativism. These attacks describe the Declaration as an attempt to universalise a particular "Western" set of ideas and to impose them upon people who were under colonial rule and thus not represented in its creation. The human rights project is dismissed as an instrument of "cultural imperialism" or "neo-colonialism."' 'The whole range of human rights of poor people is at risk when special interests are dressed up as universal rights.' In our view, it is the ambiguity inherent in the Declaration that makes it prone to abuse by totalitarian democrats.[5] According to Maritain (1949 quoted in Glendon 1999, p, 15-16), dignity possesses no more immunity to hijacking than any other concept. What is more, Glendon (1999, p. 13) declares that the path from dignity to rights is not clear and straight.

Jack Donnelly (1982, p. 304) defines human rights as rights, not benefits, duties, privileges, or some other perhaps related practice. Rights are special entitlements of *persons*. Human rights are conceived as naturally inhering in the human person. They are neither granted by the state nor are they the result of one's actions. 'Exactly how nature creates or confers rights is rather obscure, at least in non-theistic theories. Nonetheless, such a natural basis seems

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[5] We will elaborate this point further in our discussion of national sovereignty and human rights in later pages.

essential to distinguish human rights from other types of rights, such as basic constitutional, legal, or moral rights. We should also note, however, that although the moral source of human rights is human nature, their institutionalisation is crucial to their effective enjoyment ...' (Donnelly 1982, p. 305). 'Since they are grounded in human nature, human rights are generally viewed as inalienable, at least in the way in which one's nature is inalienable. However, at the minimum, what is suggested is that in some moral sense one cannot fully renounce, transfer, or otherwise alienate one's human rights. To do so would be to destroy one's humanity, to de-nature oneself, to become other (less) than a human being and thus it is viewed as a moral impossibility' (Donnelly 1982, p. 306). 'Human rights are relatively absolute, at least in part because their natural and inalienable character is based largely on the attributes and potentials they protect, which are essential to a meaningful and fully human life' (Donnelly 1982, p. 306)

What is human nature, if there is such a thing?

The concept of human nature seeks to define the *substance* of human beings; that is, the defining characteristics of a human being. Almost all major philosophers have discussed the concept of substance. It developed in the Ancient world and culminated in the work of Aristotle. His account of substance dominated debate through the Middle Ages and until the Early Modern period. The term 'substance' has been used in two ways. According to Munnynck (1912) whom I quote at length,

> "the more generic use refers to the Greek *ousia* or Latin *substantia*, which means being – something that stands under or grounds things. For example, for an atomist, atoms are substances for they are the basic things from which everything is constructed. For Hume, impressions and ideas are substances for the same reason.
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> A more specific use of the term substance refers to substances as a particular kind of basic entity. Hume's impressions and ideas are not substances in this regard. Aristotle was more concerned with this more specific use than the general one above. In the *Categories*, Aristotle distinguishes between individual objects and the various kinds of properties they can possess. Each individual term signifies either *substance* or *quantity* or *qualification* or *a relative* or *where* or *when* or *being in a position of having* or *doing* or *being affected*. His distinction between primary and secondary substance is noteworthy. Fido, the dog, is a primary substance – an individual; but 'dog' or 'doghood' is the secondary substance or substantial kind. What makes

something a thing of that kind; for example, what is involved in being a dog? Or rather, what makes a dog a dog? This question seeks the essence of substantial kinds. What makes that particular individual of a given kind? What is involved in a dog's being and remaining Fido? This is the question of individual essences over time. Aristotle was preoccupied with questions of the first kind.

Substance, therefore, signifies being as existing in and by itself, and serving as a subject or basis for accidents and accidental changes. 'In ancient days Heraclitus, in modern times Hume, Locke, Mill, and Taine, and in our day Wundt, Mach, Paulsen, Ostwald, Ribot, Jodi, Höffding, Eisler, and several others deny the reality of substance and consider the existence of substance as an illusory postulate of naive minds. The basis of this radical negation is an erroneous idea of substance and accident. They hold that, apart from the accidents, substance is nothing, a being without qualities, operations, or end. This is quite erroneous. The accidents cannot be separated thus from the substance; they have their being only in the substance; they are not the substance, but are by their very nature modifications of the substance" (Munnynck 1912 quoted in the Catholic Encyclopaedia).

Going by Aristotle's question of the essence of substantial kinds, the consensus is that a human being is rational and therefore has a conscience. Rationality seems to be the distinguishing feature in humans that sets them apart from the other animals. Rationality enables man to live in society and form political organisations. However, as we saw at the end of Chapter One above, but also in Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment above, history has proved that the rationalist-humanist tradition of the Enlightenment rationality has brought man untold misery. Birmingham (2006, p. 6) also argues that 'the rationality of nature, the self-evidence of reason, and the progress of history have given way to the death camps and holes of oblivion, leaving us to face nothing but ourselves.' Rationality implies several things, among which are individual moral agency and self-determination; these have shaped the contemporary understanding of human rights. Basically this seems to be the view that to a great extent informed the framers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Arendt argues against the traditional concept of human nature and proposes instead that natality or the fact of birth is what distinguishes humans from the rest of the animals. But we may argue that the fact of birth is not unique to humans; living things in general and animals in particular also experience this phenomenon of natality in their own way. Natality therefore cannot explain the essence of the human being, the 'what is involved in being a human?' or rather, 'what makes a human a human?'[6] In our view, rationality, not its glorification or idolatry, is what enables human beings to actualise their unique capacities heralded by the phenomenon of natality that Arendt proposes. Arendt, therefore, does not unearth something new but mistakes a biological fact common to all living things for the foundation of human rights. It still remains for Arendt to ascertain what it is about the human being that demands the recognition of her exceptional 'right to have rights'. As it were, we cannot ground human rights and hence political action in the natural event of natality as such because it fails to explain what we are or answer the question of who we are. Giorgio Agamben (1998 quoted in Birmingham 2006, p. 17) argues that grounding the political generally, and human rights in particular, in a natural and physical event is to court the danger of biologism, which Arendt herself wishes to avoid. Agamben suggests that the danger facing the political today is not so much metaphysics, with its various notions of human nature, as it is these biological organic fantasies that seek to provide grounds for the many racist and ethnic ideologies that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries know all too well (quoted in Birmingham 2006, p. 17).

The Right to Have Rights

Arendt admits that the ontological event of natality is not metaphysical; it is not the origin of anything like human nature. She argues that, 'the human condition is not the same as human nature. And the sum total of activities and capabilities which correspond to the human

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[6] The question 'What is a human being?' continues to be a question of the highest order in philosophy. In ancient philosophy, a human being was thought to possess in himself all the basic elements of the universe. The ancient Greeks, particularly Aristotle, understood man as a social being endowed with a reasoning soul. In Christianity, the human being, created in the image and likeness of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual. The human being has crucial moral significance in as much as the person surpasses in value the entire material universe. However, contemporary bioethicists such as Peter Singer argue that a human being has of itself no moral significance; those who believe in such are guilty of speciesism. In other words, human beings do not have any essential differences from the lower animals; in fact they should be treated in the same way. Since Descartes's *Cogito Ergo Sum* man's soul and body have been understood dualistically. The body is regarded as a machine, and the soul is identified with consciousness. This dualistic ontology of man continues to influence debates about necessity, freedom and moral responsibility, immortality and so on. [Spirkin, A 1983 'Chapter 5: On the Human Being and Being Human' in *Dialectical Materialism*, Transcribed by Robert Cymbala, Progress Publishers, USSR]

condition do not constitute anything like human nature' (Arendt 1958, p. 9). 'Natality is the condition of human existence, but it can never explain what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that it cannot condition us absolutely' (Arendt 1958, p. 10). The 'who' does not possess an enduring, fixed nature but is instead inherently marked by contingency and unpredictability. 'Arendt's ontology [therefore] does not describe an immutable order of essences. It does not seek enduring truths upon which to ground both thought and action, it does not posit a metaphysical notion of human nature nor subjectivity in which human rights are inalienably inscribed. Instead it is rooted in an event that provides the *arche* and the *principium* of human action. By articulating this principium, Arendt does not give us an ontological politics, rather, she provides an ontological foundation of human rights (Birmingham 2006, p. 12). As mentioned above, the fact of natality on its own is insufficient to account for the right to have rights. The spontaneous appearance of a rational and autonomous individual human among a plurality of others is *only* a promise to the flourishing of the human world. It is this spontaneity coupled with man's rational capabilities that dignifies an individual as a *human*, in Arendt's sense of the word. As this individual actualises his capacity to bring something unique to the human world, he at the same time demonstrates his right to have rights – his right to be recognised as a unique human being endowed with unique potential for the public world. This right is therefore foundational; all other rights, which will facilitate the fulfilment of his tremendous potential, follow from this. Failure to recognise this right of humans to have rights – regardless of their gender, race, religion, beliefs, and so on – is an affront to their humanity; to the extent that we can justifiably say that the right to have rights is what defines a human being. Respect for one's humanity or dignity simply means respecting one's right to have rights.

While Arendt disdains the metaphysical language of human nature, our view is that human rights, and the right to have rights in particular, enriches human nature. Whereas we can predicate natality and also the right to have rights to the rest of the animal kingdom (in terms of animal rights), what sets humans apart is their ability to *claim* their right to have rights. Herein lies the distinguishing mark of humanity – *logos* or reasoned speech. Arendt herself argues in *The Human Condition* that speech (and action) discloses the unique identity of the agent, the essence of difference. Speech (and action) 'are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. This appearance ... rests on ... an initiative from which no human can refrain and still be human' (Arendt 1958, p. 176). A

life without speech and action is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men. The disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and deeds. Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words (Arendt 1958, p. 178-179). For Arendt, more fundamental than the rights of justice and freedom is the right to action and opinion and the right to belong to a political community in which one's speech and action are rendered significant. This clarifies the right to have rights – the right to live in a framework where one is judged by one's actions and opinions. Arendt radically reformulates the modern framework of human rights such that the rights of freedom and agency are rooted in the more fundamental right of action and speech; the right of sovereignty is replaced with the right to belong to an organised political space, with its inherent plurality of actors.

For Arendt, the exclusion of the idea of humanity and the reduction of human rights to the self-interested power of a sovereign and isolated individuals provide the theoretical underpinnings first to nineteenth century imperialism, in which 'everything is permitted', and then to twentieth century totalitarianism, with its race ideologies for which 'everything is possible' (Arendt 1958, p. 38). Only through a radical reformulation of power, freedom and the public space is it possible to sever human rights from sovereign agency and sovereign state power (Arendt 1958, p. 40).

The Paradox of Human Rights and their Incompatibility with National (State) Sovereignty.

When human beings, in their individuality or plurality, appeal to human rights for the protection of their persons in an event where their life is at stake, human rights unveil their idiosyncratic abstractness, proving right our claim that they are nothing but mere gorgeous bumper stickers. Parekh (2004, p. 41-52) has brilliantly captured this paradox in her article 'A Meaningful Place in the World: Hannah Arendt on the Nature of Human Rights'. She argues that the failure to protect the rights of minorities and stateless people in Europe prior to the Second World War can be explained in part by a conflict between the rights of a nation to sovereignty and the rights of an individual to basic human rights. The wellbeing and the good functioning of the nation-state were put above the rights of individuals living on their soil. It is little wonder that the interests of the nation-state justified stripping people of their rights.

Parekh (2004, p. 44) traces this conflict in history back to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen that had no external origin but man himself. The inalienability of these rights required no special authority to protect them; they were the foundation of all other laws.

'While the post-war settlements – the Versailles Treaty, the League of Nations, the Minority Treaties – sought to heal some of the wounds of war, Arendt argues that these were hopeless efforts to solve the problem without addressing its fundamental cause, the principle of national sovereignty itself' (Isaac 1996 quoting Arendt 1973, p. 279). Arendt's rejection of sovereign power has its basis in her rejection of the dominant philosophical understanding of freedom, which from Augustine onward has largely understood freedom as located in the subjective will. Her understanding of freedom is political, located not in the 'I will' but in the 'I am able.' Indebted to Aristotle, she argues that freedom is always freedom to move, and is by definition worldly. Freedom is experienced in the process of acting and nothing else. The capacity to act and move must be understood as the capacity to begin. The Greek word *archein* which covers beginning, leading, ruling – the outstanding qualities of the free man – bears witness to an experience in which being free and the capacity to begin something coincided (Birmingham 2006, p. 54). Arendt's understanding of freedom is inseparable from power, the ability to begin. The 'I am able' must be understood as the ability to act in a public space, to move in a space of freedom with others. For Arendt, power is plural; for it to exist there must be other centres of power. Power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another. Domination, in contrast, is the loss of power that occurs only where there is a central ruling power. The notion of sovereignty can denote strength, but it can never denote power. Arendt rejects Rousseau's identification of sovereignty with power. Power therefore denotes not only the ability to act, but action in concert with others. The power structure itself precedes and outlasts all aims, so that power, far from being the means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in the means-ends category. This is why Arendt argues that full-blown terror, resulting in the complete atomisation of the political, is caused by the presence of an absolute violence without the presence of power. Power that is present when people act in concert has completely disappeared.

The crimes against humanity committed by the totalitarian regimes were the most brutal, extreme examples of the indifference, and often hostility, to human rights that are inscribed in the very logic of national sovereignty (Isaac 1996 quoting Arendt 1973, p. 63). What is the basis of national sovereignty? Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) argued that 'the nature of man was not such that one could deduce natural law from it, or rather that the natural law so deduced placed no important limits on the power of the ruler to do as he pleased, to remake society as he wished, that social order was purely a creation of state power' (Donald http://jim.com/rights.html). Hobbes claimed that in a state of nature it is a war of all against all, and life is 'poor, solitary, nasty, brutish, and short'. This is a direct contradiction of the usual natural law argument that man is a social animal, adapted by nature to live most peaceably with his fellow men, and do business with them quietly. For Hobbes the state is entitled to limited power and right is whatever the state, through its laws, says is right, and wrong whatever the state says is wrong (Donald http://jim.com/rights.html). For Hobbes, an unjust law is a contradiction in terms because the will of the state is itself a standard of justice, thus the ruler can do no wrong. The ruler is answerable to God, but everyone else is answerable only to the ruler. Hobbes saw rights as a creation of state power: therefore in order that we may have more and better rights, state power should be as absolute and total as possible. The state should pervade and dominate every relationship in order to provide everyone with justice and rights, and suppress any form of association that it does not create and control, and the state should silence any criticism of its absolute power (so that we might be more free). If one agrees with the Hobbesian assumption that man is not a social animal, then his conclusion, that the institutions of a totalitarian state are necessary and desirable for people to be free, follows logically.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1968, p. 405), Arendt argues that totalitarian domination aims at abolishing freedom, even at eliminating human spontaneity in general, and by no means at a restriction of freedom, no matter how tyrannical. Dossa (1980, p. 309-323) shows that 'the absolute uniqueness of the Holocaust, for Arendt, has to do with the nature of the astringent and experimental aesthetics of the Nazi terror and its implications for the status of men.' *Qua* Arendt, the negative effect of Nazi terror, to thwart all political action – all spontaneity and initiative – in man, is political evil *par excellence*. The trouble with totalitarian regimes is not that they play power politics in an especially ruthless way, but that behind their politics is hidden an entirely new and unprecedented concept of power, a

supreme disregard for immediate consequences rather than ruthlessness; rootlessness and neglect of national interests rather than nationalism; contempt for utilitarian motives rather than unconsidered pursuit of self-interest (Arendt 1968, p. 417). Power, as conceived by totalitarianism, lies exclusively in the force produced through organisation. To Hitler, just like Stalin in Russia, the organisational omnipotence of the SS was incomparably more important than mere material factors, military or economic, such that defeat was not military catastrophe, nor threatened starvation of the population, but only the destruction of the SS – the elite formations which were supposed to carry the conspiracy for world rule through a line of generations to its eventual end (Arendt 1968, p. 418).

The concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is verified – all other experiments are secondary in importance. Total domination, which strives to organise the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other (Arendt 1968, p. 438). The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behaviour, and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not. Under normal circumstances this can never be accomplished, because spontaneity can never be entirely eliminated insofar as it is connected not only with human freedom but with life itself, in the sense of simply keeping alive (Arendt 1968, p. 438).

The experiment of total domination in the concentration camps depends on sealing off the latter against the world of all others, the world of the living in general, even against the outside world of a country under totalitarian rule. This isolation explains the peculiar unreality and lack of credibility that characterise all reports from the concentration camps and constitute one of the main difficulties for the true understanding of totalitarian domination, which stands or falls with the existence of these concentration and extermination camps (Arendt 1968, p. 438). The real horror of the concentration and extermination camps lies in the fact that the inmates, even if they happen to keep alive, are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they had died, because terror enforces oblivion. Murder is as

impersonal in the camps as the squashing of a gnat – inmates may die as the result of systematic torture or starvation, or because the camp is overcrowded; on the other hand, due to a shortage of new human shipments the danger arises that the camps become depopulated and so the death rate must be reduced at all costs. It is as if there were a possibility to give permanence to the process of dying itself and to enforce a condition in which both life and death are obstructed equally effectively (Arendt 1968, p. 443). There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps – its horror can never be fully embraced by the imagination for the very reason that it stands outside of life and death. It can never be fully understood because the survivor returns to the world of the living, which makes it impossible for him to believe fully his own past experiences (Arendt 1968, p. 444).

St Augustine defined evil as the privation of goodness; by implication, political evil is the privation of political goodness. But from an Arendtian perspective we may define evil as the impediment or obstruction of the political 'spirit' in man. Totalitarianism, and in particular Nazi totalitarianism, is political evil in the sense that the Nazi annihilated the 'ground' of politics in man: all individuality and spontaneity which, as it were, we may call the spirit or the drive of the political community, alongside plurality which gives these attributes occasion to flourish, were systematically eliminated by the Nazi. Our definition of political evil here is not necessarily the antithesis of political goodness. The concept of goodness in politics is susceptible to misuse and abuse. In fact, Hannah Arendt argues that goodness and politics exclude each other. Arendt's notion of goodness is based on Christian goodness as exemplified in the figure of Jesus Christ. In spite of her reverence for Jesus, Arendt argues that the goodness of Jesus actually destroys the political realm. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt shows that goodness in the Christian sense has a tendency to hide from being seen or heard: 'Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth,' (quoted in Kateb 1983, p. 90). 'The moment a good work becomes known and public, it loses its specific character of goodness, of being done for nothing but goodness' sake' (Arendt 1958, p. 77). Yet Kateb (1983, p. 90) argues that 'not to know that one is doing praiseworthy deeds is incompatible with the political will to act memorably' for the reason that the wish to do deeds that are memorable is the essence of political action. So for Arendt, respect for goodness is tantamount to disrespect for political action. Arendt learns of the destructiveness of goodness in the public realm from Machiavelli 'who dared to teach men *how not to be good*, not in the sense that men must be taught how to be bad; the criminal act, for other reasons, must also

flee being seen and heard by others' (Arendt 1958, p. 77). "Machiavelli's criterion for political action was glory; therefore all methods by which "one may indeed gain power, but not glory" are bad'. 'Badness that comes out of hiding is impudent and directly destroys the common world; [similarly], goodness that comes out of hiding and assumes a public role is no longer good, but corrupt in its own terms and will carry its corruption wherever it goes" (Arendt 1958, p. 77).

Twentieth century political evil not only 'came out of hiding' and occupied the political (or public) realm but, in so doing, it obliterated the conditions of politics in modernity. This political tragedy, epitomised in the Nazi ideology of total domination, was systematically achieved in two stages: first, the murder of the juridical person in man, and second, the killing of the moral person in man. The killing of the juridical person was done, on the one hand by putting certain categories of people outside the protection of the law and forcing at the same time, through the instrument of denationalisation, the non-totalitarian world into recognition of lawlessness. On the other hand, it was done by placing the concentration camp outside the penal system and by selecting its inmates outside the normal judicial procedure in which a definite crime entails a predictable penalty (Arendt 1968, p. 447). The destruction of a man's rights, the killing of the juridical person in him, is a prerequisite for dominating him entirely. This does not only apply to special categories such as criminals, political opponents, Jews and homosexuals, but to every inhabitant of a totalitarian state. Free consent is as much an obstacle to total domination as free opposition. The murder of the moral person is the other decisive step of the Nazi in their preparation of living corpses. It was achieved mainly by making martyrdom impossible, 'for the first time in history'. One of the greatest achievements of the Nazi Secret Police (SS) was the corruption of all human solidarity. The concentration camp inmates lived in complete solitude, which explains why they were each subdued –where where there are no witnesses, there can be no testimony; even death has meaning in a social context because there are witnesses to it, yet the social aspect of death was nonexistent in the camps. This is why when the Nazis were defeated and the camp survivors went back 'into the society of the living' the narration of the horrors of the camps were too 'other worldly' to be believed. It was as if they were telling stories from another planet. Without denying the fact that some actions can take place in isolation, and in fact they do, Arendt seems to insist that a plurality of witnesses confers validity and 'immortality' to an action – immortality because the action can live on in the minds of the witnesses. By making

death anonymous (it was impossible to find out whether a prisoner was alive or not), the concentration camps 'robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life'. 'In a sense the Nazi took away the individual's own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed' (Arendt 1968, p. 452).

The murder of the moral person puts man's conscience and his capacity for choice in an awkward position. 'When man is faced with the alternative of betraying and thus murdering his friends or of sending his wife and children, for whom he is in every sense responsible, to their death; when even suicide would mean the immediate murder of his own family – how is he to decide? The alternative was no longer between good and evil, but between murder and murder' (Arendt 1968, p. 452). Arendt suggests that it can only be a persistent stoicism that preserves the inmate's unique identity and that temporarily prevents him from being made into a living corpse. This individuality, in as much as it depends on nature and forces that cannot be controlled by the will, is the hardest to destroy. But after the murder of the moral person and the annihilation of the juridical person, the destruction of individuality is almost always successful. For Arendt, to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events. The triumph of the SS demands that the tortured victim allow himself to be led to the noose without protesting, that he renounce and abandon himself to the point of ceasing to affirm his identity (Arendt 1968, p. 455). For the SS, the system which succeeds in destroying its victim before he mounts the scaffold is incomparably the best for keeping a whole people in slavery and submission (Arendt 1968, p. 455). Like sheep to the slaughter, human beings marched without protesting, like dummies, to their death.

In Western Europe, the breakdown of the old class and party systems, the legacy of imperialism, created lonely, resentful masses standing outside all normal societal structures and relationships. Their experience of 'worldlessness' predisposed them to put their trust in ideologies that both bestowed meaning on history and invited them to submerge their individuality in mass movements. Concentration camps, which reproduced the existential situation of the modern masses as worldless, bewildered beings, functioned as laboratories of total domination aiming to reduce inmates to bundles of conditioned responses; the ultimate

intention of which, Arendt believed, was to turn society at large into a camp in which freedom, spontaneity, and plurality as such could be extinguished (Hinchman and Hinchman 1994, p. 1).

Arendt's critics, such as John Stanley, deny that totalitarianism is a 'peculiarly modern phenomenon, inconceivable outside the context of twentieth century problems and experiences, and that it is a novel kind of government, essentially different from old-fashioned tyranny' (Hinchman and Hinchman 1994, p. 3). But for Arendt, Nazi totalitarianism is modern only in its usage of terror to annihilate the human status of man. While Arendt acknowledges the genocides and murders of the past and even of her time, she insists that the Holocaust was absolutely unique.[7] Arendt argues that Nazi policies were devoid of any utilitarian motives or self-interest of the rulers. Indeed, this in uncommon because most rulers, dictators, tyrants, and so on, have at least some utilitarian motive for their aspiration to power. Mostly it is the gratification of their selfish economic interests or, rarely, the pursuit of the common good of the nation. Neither of these applied to Hitler. Hitler was impelled by a sense of racial mission, sustained by visions of Teutonic destiny, in which temporal motives were suspect (Dossa 1980, p. 309-323). To Arendt, motives, no matter how sordid or silly, have limited aims and thus retain their human comprehensibility because they participate in the ordinary politics and economics of reality: power and wealth. Dossa (1980, p. 309-323) perceives that the principle of self-interest is a necessary ingredient in the construction of reality and an effective foil against the ascetic selflessness of the totalitarian mentality. Arendt, in the same way, argues that selflessness, because of its indifference to personal interest, may well be a moral virtue; but it is certainly not a political virtue and may even spell doom in the human world. It is interesting to note here that while morality and politics may be 'public' buddies, they may be opposed to each other at times especially in the Arendtian political sphere – for instance, goodness, which is a moral ideal, is not a political ideal at all.

For Arendt, the uniqueness of the Holocaust also comes in the way it treated its victims – as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them was no longer of interest to anybody. In the privacy of concentration camps, away from the public realm, the victims were deprived of

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[7] Arendt thinks that to suffer and inflict suffering is quite normal: she is reconciled and somewhat inured to the practice of violence among men. The human necessity for violence and domination emerges as one of the central motifs of her vision of true politics. Like Machiavelli, Arendt believes that violence is a natural and human activity, a legitimate prelude to founding a regime and to the life of citizenship.

the elementary right to be objects of human care and concern. Unseen and unheard, they had ceased to exist for the world outside. The Nazis were thus able to experiment with, to consume bit by bit, the prepared bodies of their mastered victims without any trace of passion. Outside the realm of life and death, which need public confirmation to assure their reality, even death was deprived of its minimal dignity. Again, the discovery of racial origin as the criterion of natural guilt sets Nazi totalitarianism apart. For the Jews, as the centre of Nazi ideology, life in the most basic sense became impossible within this macabre context. Whatever one did or did not do ceased to matter at all: to be Jewish (or Gypsy or Slav) was quite enough. The concentration camp was not a calculable punishment for definite offenses. Death became the automatic consequence of the accident of racial origin. On the whole, we may say that the absolute uniqueness of the Holocaust was contained in the parallel assaults on the public structure of 'normal reality' and on the personal structure of individuality and freedom. In its successful elimination of spontaneity and difference, Nazi totalitarianism radically undermined the human status of man: 'human nature as such is at stake', that is, human nature as we had come to know it was being transformed in the concentration camps (Dossa 1980, p. 309-323).

The idea of political evil is tied to the individual human being, who is the subject and object of the political sphere. Heywood (1999, p. 27) argues that the term 'individual' has become so commonplace in modernity that its implications and political significance are often ignored, yet the individual 'is one of the cornerstones of Western political culture'. Individualism entails 'a belief in the primacy of the individual over any social group or collective body, suggesting that the individual is central to any political theory' (Heywood 1999, p. 27). Nelson (1996, p. 360) argues that the classical tradition of politics presumed the existence of the morally autonomous individual, which is why they assumed that human beings possess by nature a social and ethical capacity. Twentieth century political ideologies, on the contrary, have succeeded in replacing 'the idea of personal autonomy with a higher principle of moral progress beyond the individual, 'supposedly embodied in the nation itself', a principle to which the individual is to subordinate himself. 'Such' ideologies endeavour to subordinate the individual's moral 'and political' agency rather than actualise it' (Nelson 1996, p. 360).

The individual in a totalitarian dictatorship possesses no natural rights that the state must respect. The state regards the individuals merely as building blocks, the human material to be hammered and hewed into a new social order (Perry 2001, p. 542). While totalitarian dictatorship is an antithesis of liberal democracy, it is also its unintended consequence. The dictator manipulates the masses in a democratic government into thinking that totalitarian government is a higher and truer expression of the people's will. According to Arendt, totalitarian leaders seek to transform the world according to an all-embracing ideology which pretends to know the mysteries of the whole historical process – the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, and the uncertainties of the future (Perry 2001, p. 542). This ideology pervades the school curriculum and influences everyday speech and social relations. The state is concerned with everything its citizens do; there is no distinction between public and private life, and every institution comes under the party-state's authority (Perry 2001, p. 543). If voluntary support for the regime cannot be generated by indoctrination, then the state unhesitatingly resorts to terror and violence to compel obedience. People live under a constant strain. Fear of the secret police is ever present; it produces a permanent state of insecurity, which induces people to do everything that the regime asks of them and to watch what they say and do (Perry 2001, p. 543).

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1968, p. 51) Arendt argues that 'human history has known no story more difficult to tell. Told as propaganda, the whole story not only fails to become a political argument – it does not even sound true'. Arendt thinks that 'totalitarianism happened against all odds – it was a kind of miracle, a black miracle. She is clear that after happening once, a phenomenon may more readily happen again. The hard time is the first time: so hard that the phenomenon must remain inexplicable' (Kateb 1983, p. 55). The concentration camps are the laboratories in the experiment of total domination, for human nature being what it is, this goal can be achieved only under the extreme circumstances of human made hell. Conversely, Agamben (1998) argues that the process is in a certain sense the inverse of what Arendt takes it to be, and that precisely the radical transformation of politics into the realm of bare life (that is, the camp) legitimated and necessitated total domination. Only because politics in our age had been entirely transformed into biopolitics was it possible for politics to be constituted as totalitarian politics to a degree hitherto unknown (Agamben 1998, p. 119). Totalitarianism is biopolitics investing itself more directly in life which becomes immediately political. In view of this, the Nazi extermination of the Jews under Hitler must be understood

within a juridical and political order of the killing of bare life and not within the religious violence of a Holocaust (Agamben 1998, p. 114). Agamben (1998) points out that Nazi politics should therefore be understood not simply according to the paradigm of extermination, but also as the production of bare life.

Genel (2006, p. 55) demonstrates that totalitarianism is characterised by the conception of power as the immediate decision on the value and non-value of life. Agamben (1998) identifies this phenomenon as the starting point of the biological practices of euthanasia and human experimentation. If some life has been deemed as 'devoid of value', as the German Jews were in the eyes of the Nazi, it could be exposed to human experimentation and even mass killing with impunity.[8] Agamben (1998, p. 164) suggests that nowadays life and death are not properly scientific concepts but rather political concepts which as such acquire a political meaning precisely only through a decision of the sovereign. In other words, in the Modern Age sovereign power cuts across the medical and biological sciences. Using examples from these sciences, Agamben (1998) claims that hospital rooms have become spaces of exception where physicians have to decide over lives that may be killed without the commission of homicide.[9]

Genel (2006, p. 55) also indicates that biological facts have nowadays become political objectives, and politics is then understood in terms of the *police*.[10] The concern for race (which is biological) and the struggle against foreign enemies are indissociable elements in which politics and biology are confounded.[11] According to Agamben (1998), Nazism is intelligible from this biopolitical perspective and this is why he calls the camp the biopolitical paradigm of modern politics. He argues that the camp should not be looked at as a historical fact and an anomaly that belongs nonetheless to the past, but rather in some sense as a hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we still live. Genel (2006, p. 56) shows that 'the camp refers to diverse situations that all have in common the indistinction between [rule]

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[8] This would not make the killer guilty of homicide.

[9] Agamben cites the example of the comatose patient (one who lives on life-support machines and hovers between life and death) as an example of bare life, or *homo sacer*.

[10] Emphasis mine. The meaning of the word '*police*' here should be understood simply as 'to watch over'. Nowadays the state has assumed the role of watching over bare lives, but also enemies of the state.

[11] Apartheid South Africa is an example biopolitics in as much as it was concerned with race.

and life; the [rule] invests itself in life to the point that life becomes confounded in it.' In the camp it is therefore impossible for bare life to distinguish between his life as a living being and his existence as a political subject.

In the same way, 'man (bare life) is the source and bearer of rights, but these rights are preserved in the citizen, yet it is the nation that is sovereign' (Agamben 1998, p. 127). The separation between humanitarianism and politics that we are experiencing today is the extreme phase of the separation of the rights of man from the rights of the citizen. Parekh (2004, p. 41) shows that the condition of rightlessness in contemporary politics is no mere historical problem, but rather is still one of the most pressing problems in international politics. The question of the relationship between human rights and politics that Hannah Arendt addresses in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is an important one, not merely for our understanding of totalitarianism but also for understanding our own political situation. 'The people who created the international human rights movement after World War 2 were under no illusion that universal assent to human rights already existed. The horrors of the Holocaust, with the genocidal attempt to destroy European Jewry, were too much in view to permit any such illusion. They hoped that substantial agreement on standards of government behaviour could be found or created among the members of the United Nations. They hoped that these standards will express the hopes of millions of people around the world who yearned for freedom and a better life' (Nickel 1987, p. 61).

The twenty-first century has seen the rise of terror as a major weapon of government, and the nature of terrorism is exactly as Arendt described it half a century ago. Needless to say, this is the point which Arendt foretold in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958) that in modernity terror has become the major weapon of government. September 11, 2001 reminded the world that slaughter remains a fundamental problem for the entire world. However, the international law experts claim that the US War on Terror after the September 11 attacks has eroded human rights worldwide (Macinnis 2009). Mary Robinson, who was the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights when al Qaeda militants flew hijacked planes into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in 2001, says that the United States caused harm with some of the ways it responded (Macinnis 2009). Referring to the harsh US detentions and interrogations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, and Cuba, she suggests that it is time to repeal the abusive laws and policies. Former Chief Justice of South Africa, Arthur Chaskalson, claims that

counter-terrorism practices have shifted around the world and could keep restricting liberties if they are not confronted head on. He argues that we all have fewer rights today than we had five or ten years ago, and if nothing happens we will have even fewer (Macinnis 2009).

Whereas others in the modern human rights tradition claim that individuals as autonomous agents have the right to determine for themselves how they wish to live their own lives, the situation may not represent all human beings worldwide. The human rights situation in Africa, for instance, is nowhere better exemplified than in Julius Nyerere's address to the University of Toronto, 1969: 'What freedom has our subsistence farmer? He scratches a bare living from the soil provided the rains do not fail; his children work at his side without schooling, medical care, or even good feeding. Certainly he has freedom to vote and to speak as he wishes. But these freedoms are much less real to him than his freedom to be exploited. Only as his poverty is reduced will his existing political freedom become properly meaningful and his right to human dignity become a fact of human dignity' (Nyerere 1969, pp. 467-490).

CHAPTER THREE

HUMAN STATUS AND THE REALITY OF POLITICS IN AFRICA

'Unless the labour of mourning has been successfully completed – that is, unless individuals have sincerely come to terms with the past – they exhibit a marked incapacity to live the present'

– Freud S 1957, pp. 243-244.

The previous chapter has examined the relationship between human rights and political evil in modernity. Arendt reformulates the principle of humanity to provide a new guarantee for human dignity and human rights. Drawing on the above analyses – Chapters One and Two – this chapter examines the human status of the African as the foundation for political freedom and human rights in postcolonial Africa. It underscores the thesis that unless postcolonial Africans have sincerely come to terms with the past and dealt with it adequately they cannot live politically fulfilling lives. We will start with a glance at Africa's colonial past to show the reader the far-reaching effects of European imperialism on the African continent, particularly the crisis of governance in African states. We will also examine more closely the South African political community to appreciate the role of forgiveness – of past atrocities – in politics. Forgiveness is the lasting solution to the problem of the indeterminacy of the consequences of political action. Forgiveness in itself can mark a new beginning in the African political sphere.

Africa's Colonial Past

The closing years of the nineteenth century witnessed the consummation of European imperial ambitions in the complete dismemberment and colonisation of Africa.[12] Colonial conquest and the imposition of violent European rule on the partially destroyed and suppressed indigenous societies, and the insertion of Africa into the modern European capitalist world as a dependable appendage to it, effected decisive breaks and distortions in the previous patterns of life prevalent on the continent at large (Serequeberhan 1991, p. 5).

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[12] With the exception of the kingdom of Abyssinia, that is, modern day Ethiopia.

The colonising structure comprised three complementary hypotheses and actions: the domination of the physical space, the reformation of the native's minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective (Mudimbe 1988, p. 2). The drive behind colonialism was the belief (by whites) in the inherent superiority of the white race, and the necessity for European economies and structures to expand to 'virgin areas' of the world. Mudimbe (1988, pp. 46-47) argues that three figures, from the fifteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, determined modalities and the pace of mastering, colonising, and transforming the 'Dark Continent': the explorer (in search of a sea route to India), the soldier (the most visible figure of the expansion of European jurisdiction), and the missionary (to expand the absoluteness of Christianity and its virtues). The best symbol of the colonial enterprise was, paradoxically, the missionary, who devoted himself to the expansion of civilisation, the dissemination of Christianity, and the advance of progress. Through him as a bearer of the 'Gospel' and embodying the Christian virtues of justice and kindness, the savage mind was easily subdued in the name of God. With equal enthusiasm, the missionary served as an agent of a political empire, a representative of a civilisation, and also at the same time as an envoy of God.

The human status of the African was not readily acknowledged by these European 'explorers'. Arendt (1968, p. 190) argues that "upon setting his eyes on the black person, the European was shocked and 'horrified' to see humanlike creatures who 'howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled the European was just the thought of their humanity – the thought of the remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. These native savages lived without the future of a purpose and the past of an accomplishment; they were as incomprehensible as the inmates of a madhouse – they cursed, prayed to the European and welcomed him." The image of the African as 'brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful, and superstitious' (Coetzee & Roux 1998, p. 2) that prevailed in Europe and its colonies had antecedents in the ethnocentrism of philosophers like David Hume (1711–1776), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Gottfried Wilhelm Hegel (1770–1831). Hume and Kant held the view that Africans, by virtue of their blackness, are precluded from the realm of reason and civilisation (Serequeberhan 1991, p. 5). Hume declared that 'there never was a civilised nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in action and speculation. No ingenious manufacturer among them, no arts, no sciences ... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries

and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men' (Mudimbe 1988, p. 2). Making a subtle observation on the intellectual capacities of a black person, Kant astutely remarked that 'this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid' (Serequeberhan 1991, p. 6). Hegel declared in his *Philosophy of History* that the Negro is beyond the pale of humanity proper. 'The characteristic feature of the negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity – of God or the law – in which the will of man could participate and in which he could become aware of his own being. The African, in his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, has not yet succeeded in making this distinction between himself as an individual and his essential universality, so that he knows nothing of an absolute being which is other and higher than his own self' (Masolo 1994, p. 3). For Hegel, history was a process of change through the intervention of reason in the world. Through reason, man knows and transforms his reality in a continuous dialectical manner. Reason is not just a logical structure but also historical reality. 'All that is rational is real, and all that is real is rational' (Masolo 1994, p. 3) – in other words, reason identifies itself with the reality it creates. For Hegel, culture was the concretisation of reason in its historical moments. To identify signs of cultural change was to identify the intensity of dialectical reason at work in the world. No culture implies no reason, and no reason implies no culture. He argues that 'in this main portion of Africa, history is in fact out of the question, life in Africa is not a manifestation of dialectical reason but of a succession of contingent happenings and surprises ... Africans live in a state of innocence. They are unconscious of themselves, as in the natural and primitive state of Adam and Eve in the biblical paradise before the emergence of reason and will ... The condition in which they live is incapable of any historical development or culture. Hegel categorically affirmed that Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. In view of Hegel's philosophy of history, Africans have no history' (Serequeberhan 1991, p. 6). Nevertheless, Lucien Levy-Bruhl, the leading French ethnologist of his time, is considered to be the most popular proponent of African mental inferiority. He denied all abstract thought to the traditional African, whom he described as a savage with primitive mentality (Masolo 1994, p. 7). Levy-Bruhl dedicated nearly all the last 39 years of his life to the study of African ways of thinking, or primitive mentality, as he called them.

Hannah Arendt argues in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1968, p.192) that "when and where peoples are conflicted with such tribes of which they have no historical record and which do not know any history of their own, the word 'race' assumes a precise meaning. Whether these represent "prehistoric man", the accidentally surviving specimens of the first forms of human life on earth, or whether they are "post-historic" survivors of some unknown disaster which ended a civilisation, we do not know. 'What made them different from other human beings was not at all the colour of their skin but the fact that they behaved like part of nature, that they treated nature as their undisputed master, that they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality – compared to which they appeared to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike. They were, as it were, "natural" human beings who lacked the specifically human reality, so that when European men massacred them [the Africans] somehow were not aware that [the Europeans] had committed a murder." Arendt submits that the blacks 'were a horrifying experience of something alien beyond imagination or comprehension; it was tempting indeed to simply declare that these were not human beings' (Arendt 1968, p. 195). In fact Arendt argues that 'to think of murder in the presence of these people seemed wholly inappropriate, almost ridiculous.' For Arendt, the real crime began, in a certain sense, only when Indians and Chinese were murdered by the imperialists: 'there could be no excuse and no humanly comprehensible reason for treating Indians and Chinese as though they were not human beings.' In her view, Indians and Chinese were after all civilised, historical people with undeniable claims to human status (Dossa 1980, p. 309-323). In the case of Africans no 'real crime' was involved in their murder because they had renounced their humanity by their inability or their unwillingness to establish the human reality of politics (Dossa 1980, p. 309-323). It is beyond the scope of this project, however, to discuss Arendt's ethnocentrism, which is implicit in her writings, but her description of the human status of the African is very important in as far as the reality of politics in Africa is concerned.[13] Her views on the mass murder of Africans give us an insight into her thoughts about the significance of human status for her conception of politics.

For Arendt, the combined political human failure of the African consists in the fact that 'the blacks were proudly at one with nature in all its organic glory ... they were unable to master

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[13] Arendt's conception of the human status of the African 'savage' is inspired by prominent authors of her time, notably Conrad. Her writing on 'Race and Bureaucracy' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, for instance, is inspired by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*

nature sufficiently, to fabricate an artifice beyond the one naturally given, unable to establish public bodies' (Dossa 1980, p. 309-323). In her view, the blacks testify to a general lack of human culture and morality: people who had escaped the reality of civilisation (Dossa 1980, p. 309-323). It is this touch of inhumanity among human beings who apparently were as much part of nature as wild animals that stimulated the great horror that had seized the European men at their first confrontation with nature itself (Arendt 1968, p. 194). Arendt's claim makes sense if we consider Dossa's statement that 'the right to life itself is in jeopardy when that right is unsupported by a framework of politics.' For Arendt, the political sphere is an 'artificial' creation of humans. It is a sphere of appearance where men appear to each other and demonstrate their individuality and difference through speech and action. It is a sphere of freedom rather than necessity – rather than the biological processes of reproduction and sustenance. The deeds of this public sphere (action and speech) assume an immortality which is unknown in the sphere of necessity. For Arendt, it is the sphere of politics that defines the specifically human character, which was lacking in the African. In as far as Arendtian politics is concerned, one may hastily conclude that the African was, as it were, indeed less human and more animal-like – in terms of being at one with nature. However, it is worth noting also that not all Europeans at that time were political in the sense that she describes politics. This is why her theory of politics and freedom is reminiscent of ancient Greek politics – in her attempt to address the dissolution of the sphere of politics and the subsequent glorification of the sphere of necessity in the European public sphere, Arendt sought to restore the sphere of politics by revisiting the classical Greek definitions of politics and public life. We will go into these details in Chapters Four and Five.

Of course, it is a fact that at that time Europeans had mastered nature in the sense of fabricating artefacts or tools out of nature for human use. The Industrial Revolution testifies to this. But for Arendt, mere fabrication is not political: it may give a nation political advantage in terms of warfare supremacy over other nations, but it is not in itself a typical political activity. It would be too sweeping therefore to argue that all Europeans were conscious of their specifically human character. At best we can argue that their surprise at the sight of a different 'race' of people was not unnatural, it was expected. It is not far-fetched to imagine as well how horrified the native Africans were at the sight of the European. It is not unnatural that the first thought that crossed both parties' minds was self-preservation in the Hobbesian sense (a drive which is, as it were, anti-political in Arendt's sense). Dossa as well

shows that even for Arendt, it seems that murder was the only way the European could approach strange alien people who had the most tenacious claim to humanity (Dossa 1980, p. 309-323). Not much is known, or rather documented, about what was going on in the mind of the native (because at that time, oral tradition was the only available means of passing down information), but I submit that, like his European counterpart, the native may not have trusted his sense of sight that the 'ghost-like-creature' before him was a fellow human being. It is little wonder that the jungles of Africa, at least for some time, afforded an ideal state of nature where self-preservation and the preservation of people of the same 'race' were of primary importance over and above the expansion and evangelisation interests that the Europeans had on the agenda.

It is worth noting that for Arendt, humanness or human status is partly a function of politics and its common life of citizenship; a political community is thus also a moral community which endows its members with a measure of humanity (Dossa 1980, p. 309-323). The right to life *per se*, let alone any other rights, is unavailable to anyone who can claim no more than the minimum fact of his or her human origin (Arendt 1968, p. 300). For Arendt, political people are the ones who have mastered nature; their deeds and actions live on even after they are dead – the deeds take on immortality because of their contribution to the 'shared world', the public (political) world. But savage tribes are perfectly in a state of nature for the reason that they live and die without leaving any trace, without having contributed anything to the 'shared world'.

Arendt's comparison of the mass murder of native Africans with the mass murder of the Jews in Nazi Germany provides a clear insight into her conception of politics and the reality of politics in Africa. Arendt could not comprehend how 'unnatural' human beings – the Jews – could be reduced to 'natural' beings and murdered as pathetically as if they knew neither a history, a tradition, nor a past of human achievement. For the European Jews, unlike Africans, were unmistakably human; their right to life and citizenship were established legal facts (Dossa 1980, p. 309-323). This is why the Nazi had to deprive the Jews of their juridical and political rights first – depriving them of their capacity for action and opinion, hence transforming them from political beings to natural beings – before they could expel them from 'the world of the living' (Arendt 1968, p. 296). It is for this reason that Arendt condemns Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi official responsible for the Final Solution, not for his violation of

the individuality and difference of the Jewish people, but for the violation of plurality. Nevertheless, the violation of plurality – genocide – was not unique to the Holocaust. Mass murders have been part and parcel of human history and they are prosecuted because they violate the order of mankind. But Arendt's condemnation of Eichmann lies in the latter's assault on the human status of the Jewish people. Unlike native Africans who lacked any 'civilisation', the Jews were civilised. Arendt herself noted with shock that Eichmann made a distinction between 'cultured' and 'primitive' Jews – that 'this proposal 'the killing' concerned only native Jews, not Jews from the Reich or any of the Western countries.' Eichmann's conscience rebelled, not at the idea of murder, but at the idea of German Jews being murdered (Arendt 2006b, p. 96). What gravely offended Arendt was the Nazi attempt to divide a collectively civilised and cultured people. For her, plurality is not just a group of people put together, but a shared world in which each spontaneously appears to others as a distinct individual. Eichmann's violation of plurality was therefore indeed unique in the sense that he murdered a political community. He "supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of other nations as though 'he and 'his' superiors had any right to determine who should not inhabit the world. 'Therefore', no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with 'him'. This is the reason, and the only reason 'he' must hang" (Arendt 2006b, p. 96).

It is interesting to note in Arendt's condemnation of Eichmann her allusion to the belief that no man, regardless of authority, has any right to take the life of another person – that is, to determine who should and who should not inhabit the earth. The same thinking should be applied when thinking about the African during 'the European scramble for Africa' – no European had any right to murder the native African, regardless of whether or not they were civilised and cultured. Besides, by what standards do we measure the level of civilisation?
The inherent superiority of the white race and its corresponding ideology that the European 'race' is more human (based on their culture and civilisation) leave a lot to be desired. I submit that human status is not a cultural or political construction. Humanness is a natural privilege. While different authors have tried to define the human and the non-human, it does not change the fact that one is actually born human or non-human (animal) – one is not made human by culture or civilisation. The killing of other humans is unwarranted based on this ontology.

Arendt's description of the development of politics from the *oikos*, the realm of the private, reveals an important fact: by its very nature, politics was not an activity for every human being in classical Greece. The fact that a select few can participate in politics does not make them more human than those who are at ease with living 'at one with nature'. Aristotle demonstrates that people are by nature 'social' more than *politikon* (of the *polis*), inasmuch as the household (oikos) is prior and more necessary than the *polis*. Of the two communities just mentioned the household first came to be; as Hesiod said in his verse: 'first a house, a wife, and an ox for ploughing' (Aristotle 1995, p. 9). The household, then, is by nature a community instituted for the satisfaction of daily recurrent need. *Qua* Aristotle, man is a political animal, in a higher degree than bees or other gregarious animals. Nature makes nothing in vain, and humans are the only animals who possess reasoned speech (*logos* or reason). Voice serves to indicate what is painful and pleasant; that is why it is also found in other animals, because their nature has reached the point where they can perceive what is painful and pleasant and express these to each other. But speech or *logos* serves to declare what is advantageous and harmful and so it is the peculiarity of man that he alone possesses a perception of good and evil, of the just and unjust, and other similar qualities; and it is association in these things that makes a family and a city. There is a natural impulse in all men towards an association of this sort. Aristotle is very clear that the drive for a political community exists, or rather is inherent, in every human. The *polis*, or political association, is the crown of the different associations man can set up; it completes and fulfils the nature of man. The *polis* is therefore prior to man in the sense that it is the presupposition of his true and full life (Aristotle 1995, p. 8). It is possible therefore to argue that we are first human before we can actualise the political in us. It is the human that delineates the political community not the political community that delineates the human. In fact, to actually set up the political sphere is a remarkable deed. Aristotle points out that the first human to construct a political association is responsible for things of very great goodness, but he does not say that such a one becomes more human than the others. We develop this argument further in Chapter Five – on the significance of the political community in the enrichment of the human personality.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is one European who, 'surprisingly', rebelled against civilisation. In his *La Nouvelle Heloise*, Rousseau argued that civilisation is not a good thing as everyone had

always assumed; and not even a value-neutral thing, but a positively bad thing (Magee 2001, p. 127). Rousseau believed that human beings were born good but were corrupted by the experience of growing up in society. Unlike Thomas Hobbes, he believed that our natural instincts are good; man in a state of nature is a noble savage (Magee 2001, p. 127). Civilisation, as it were, curbs and frustrates man's natural instincts and imposes the artificial categories of conceptual thinking on his emotions. The result is 'alienation' from his true self, and all-pervading falsehood and hypocrisy. Contrary to the belief of many that civilisation is the creator and propagator of values, Rousseau believed that civilisation is the corrupter and destroyer of true values. Knowing that a return to the primitive state is impossible, Rousseau suggested that we have to civilise civilisation – that is, change it in ways that allow our natural instincts and our feelings fuller and freer expression. Following Rousseau, we can argue therefore that European civilisation alienated the African from his true and authentic self.

The African Search for Authenticity (Identity)

The idea of an African rebirth has been raised and debated in various forms ever since the colonisation of the continent at the close of the nineteenth century. The idea is a child of Pan-Africanism, a movement in reaction to slavery and colonialism, which also sought to reassert African dignity and humanity (Ajulu 2001, p. 30). Soon the idea assumed a political dimension and served as a battle cry for political freedom. Nkrumah's Ghana was the first African state to achieve independence in 1957. The wave of liberation spread across much of the continent between 1960 and 1964. The immediate post-independence political preoccupation was development through economic nationalism. In his *Recours a l'authenticité*, Mobutu Sese Seko of the Congo Republic supported a new and 'aggressive' pursuit of authentic African identity. He changed his Christian name from Joseph *Desiree* to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku wa Dabanga. All places in the republic were renamed and Western attire was replaced with 'traditional' attire.

Young and Turner (1985 quoted in Ajulu 2001, p. 32) define authenticity as 'a movement tending to revive the moral, cultural, philosophical, social, and economic values distinct to the [Zairian] nation. Such a movement repudiates contradictory foreign ideas. It proceeds from a crystallisation of consciousness of the particularity of [Zairians], and the conviction that their cultural patrimony is not, as colonialists had maintained, the product of an infantile

imagination, but the expression of the soul of mature people.' The essence of *l'authenticité* was to return to ancestral heritage in order to pursue the goal of economic modernity without the alienating materialism of the Western world. 'A carefully selected past' thus unlocks the door to the future (Ajulu 2001, p. 33).

According to Frantz Fanon (quoted in Mudimbe 1988, p. 92), the colonised internalises the imposed racial stereotypes, particularly in attitudes towards technology, culture, and language. Taking colonialism as the thesis (in the manner of Hegelian dialectic), Fanon argues that African ideologies of otherness (blackness and negritude) comprise the antithesis which eventually leads to political liberation (the thesis). *Negritude* becomes the intellectual and emotional sign of opposition to the ideology of white supremacy; at the same time it asserts an authenticity which eventually expresses itself as a racial negation: rejection of racial humiliation, rebellion against the rationality of domination, and revolt against the whole colonial system (Mudimbe 1988, p. 92). This symbolic violence ultimately turns into nationalism and subsequently leads to a political struggle for liberation (Mudimbe 1988, p. 92). When the process of decolonisation, mental as well as physical, gathered momentum it led to the postcolonial quest for an African identity (Kaphagawani 1998 quoted in Coetzee & Roux 1998, p. 87). Bodunrin (1981, p. 165) shows that Africans had acquired Western modes of life in many ways; even their political system was modelled after the Westminster pattern or after that of some other European parliament. He argues that it is easier and less damaging to a people's self-pride to adopt a foreign language, a foreign mode of dress and culinary habits than it is to adopt and internalise foreign ways of social organisation. The European model of political organisation was failing in most places, hence the nostalgia for the African traditional social order and the pristine values of their ancestors. The struggle for political independence aimed at a total mental liberation and if possible a total severance of all intellectual ties with the colonial masters.

According to Nationalist-ideological philosophy, one of the four major trends in African philosophy, true and meaningful 'political' freedom must be accompanied by a true mental liberation and a return, whenever possible and desirable, to genuine and authentic traditional African humanism (Bodunrin 1981, p. 162). While Bodunrin sees this as a worthwhile aspiration, he argues that the past that the African political philosophers seek to recapture cannot be recaptured. In his *Consciencism*, Kwame Nkrumah advocates a new African

socialism that would take into account the existential situation in Africa (Bodunrin 1981, p. 166). Colonialism, Christianity, and the spread of Islam have had far-reaching effects on African traditional life; hence, any reconstruction of our social order must take these into account. Nkrumah and Nyerere both think that the traditional way of life must be their *point de depart*, but Bodunrin shows that the traditional African society was not as complex as the modern African societies – especially the crisis of conscience which now characterises modern African society was not there (Bodunrin 1981, p. 167). In a predominantly non-money economy, where people lived and worked all their lives in the same locale and among the same close relatives, African communalism was workable. It worked because of the feelings of 'familyhood' that sustained it – not a feeling of familyhood for the human race, but a feeling of closeness among those who could claim a common ancestry (Bodunrin 1981, p. 167). Bodunrin charges modern African political thinkers with romanticising the African past. He argues that certainly not everything about our past was glorious. For instance, the interminable land disputes between communities, sometimes within the same village, show that the communalism we talk about was between members of very closed groups. Besides, a way of life which made it possible for our ancestors to be subjugated by a handful of Europeans cannot be described as glorious. Bodunrin (1981, p. 167) argues that any reconstruction of our past must, therefore, examine features of our thought system and our society which made this possible. He strongly proposes that African humanism must not be a backward-looking humanism.

In his *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonisation*, Kebede (2004, p. 130) wonders of what use the revival of the African past would be: 'On top of none of the aspects of traditional life being able to solve the problems that Africa now faces, the inevitable outcome of such a revival can only be the obstruction of modernisation by instances opposed to modern life. Since what Africa needs most is to get out of its impediments by a resolute commitment to change, the recourse to traditionalism or the values of the past is at variance with the exigencies of the present, especially with the practical issues of socioeconomic and technological developments.' Kebede (2004) thinks traditionalism is strange in the way it claims to initiate a renaissance through a backward looking device. In the African situation, looking back means giving up the future – the very obstacle that needs to be removed parades as a solution. The correct attitude to the past is to study it critically so as to be able to distinguish between those elements of the past that are frankly inimical to modern life from

those which deserve to be retained because they are usable (Kebede 2004, p. 130). This is an important point because it leaves room for the African to still define and maintain his identity while embracing modernisation. However, Kebede cautions that the selective revival of the past cannot be truly progressist unless the selection maintains a commitment to a 'radical' rupture with the past (Kebede 2004, p. 131). But is a complete or radical rupture from the past practicable? The past is what shapes and influences our identity and our politics in modernity, for better or for worse. It was the same spirit that led Hannah Arendt to try to re-establish a link with the ancients, that is, the Greeks and the Romans. Knowing that it is impossible to save the past as a whole after the collapse of tradition, Arendt tried to redeem from oblivion those elements of the past that were still able to illuminate the social and political situation of her time. It is our view that Africans may, as with Arendt's journey back to ancient Greece, try to redeem from oblivion only those elements of the past that can illuminate and 'improve' our African human condition. 'The colonial experience marked a sea change of the historical process in Africa; it effected a qualitative reordering of life. It has rendered the traditional way of life no longer a viable option for our continued existence and apprehension of the world' (Abiola Irele quoted in Kebede 2004, p. 131). The apologetic perception of the past precludes Africans from taking the full measure of the disruption introduced by the colonial experience – it creates the illusion that Africans can think of modernisation in terms of continuity (Kebede 2004, p. 131).

While others view modernity as a complete rapture with the past, it is possible to view modernity as continuous with some elements of tradition that are still relevant for modernity. Richard Hooker (1996) defines modernity as the idea that the present is discontinuous with the past; that through a process of social and cultural change (either through progress or through decline), life in the present is fundamentally different from life in the past. Tradition on the other hand is the idea that the present is continuous with the past, that the present in some way repeats the forms, behaviour, and events of the past (Hooker 1996). The experience of modernity, however, is to live in traditional ways and to repeat tradition in unrecognisable forms (Hooker 1996). Modern cultures still repeat ways of thinking of the past. Modernity – the sense that the present is discontinuous with the past – is an illusion; what has changed is *social memory* – we have disconnected most of our practices and ideas from our collective memory of their origins and meaning (Hooker 1996).

In the recent years, there has been another call to African 'authenticity' through Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance. Vale and Maseko (1998 quoted in Ajulu 2001, p. 33) identify two broad interpretations of South African's discourse on African Renaissance. First is the Africanist interpretation which seeks to use the African Renaissance to construct a new African history, identity, and culture and to reassert the notion of Africanness. Like Mobutu's authenticity, this interpretation runs the risk of getting lost in the morass of ancestral heritage without producing anything new. Ndebele (1998 quoted in Ajulu 2001, p. 33) contends that 'the call for black roots has less effect than the provision of water and sanitation, electricity, telephones, houses, clinics, transport, schools, and jobs. African Renaissance should not just be about cultural regeneration but more critically about accelerated economic modernisation.' The globalist interpretation emphasises African economic and political regeneration as part and parcel of a globalising world economy. Like Nyerere and Nkrumah's progressivist interpretation of the African Renaissance, this is not just an elite plot, or a vital lie, to recruit the masses into neo-liberal politics (Ajulu 2001, p. 33).

The Crisis of Governance

From about the mid-1970s, the African continent has witnessed a proliferation of kleptocratic and predatory ruling elites who 'have robbed and pillaged and broken all laws and all ethical norms with great abandon to acquire wealth ... who seek access to power or those who have access to power so that they can corrupt the political order for personal gain at all costs' (Ajulu 2001, p. 30 quoting Thambo Mbeki 1998b, p. 2) 'This has contributed to rising debts, civil wars, and in extreme cases, the informalisation and collapse of nation states. Acceleration of globalisation and deregulation of markets has led to intense competition over dwindling resources, ultimately sharpening the predatory instincts of the continent's ruling elites. In a majority of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the predatory conversion of political power into economic wealth has been the norm rather than the exception. No wonder the main function of the majority of Sub-Saharan African states has been to facilitate the corrupt appropriation of limited resources. This class [of ruling elites] has been at the forefront of frustrating democratic [institutions] on the continent' (Ajulu 2001, p. 30).

Dauda (2007, p. 2) notes that within the last two decades, there have been many debates on the nature and future of the African postcolonial state, especially given the prevalence of internecine violence and the gradual disintegration of central authority. While some scholars

assert the exceptionality of African conflicts and explain them in terms of ethnicity and 'ancient hatreds', 'warlordism' and predatory criminal networks, greed and grievance theories, others argue that there is nothing novel about the phenomenon of state failure in Africa. According to Tilly (1975, quoted in Dauda 2007, p. 2), an 'enormous majority' of states in Europe after 1500 failed. The substantial majority of units which got so far as to acquire a recognisable existence as states during those centuries (after 1500) disappeared and, of a handful which survived or emerged into the nineteenth century as autonomous states, only a few operated effectively – regardless of what criterion we employ. A German technical report on crisis prevention and conflict management drew a tentative conclusion that 'the collapse of states in crisis need not be prevented, since a "better state" cannot emerge unless that collapse has taken place' (Dauda 2007, p. 3). A situation of statelessness lasting for some time should not by definition be viewed as problematic, but rather as a political inference, 'a much needed re-appraisal of alternative structures and futures' (Dauda 2007, p. 3). The diverse perspectives on African conflicts and the phenomenon of state failure certainly raise important issues about sovereignty, the inviolability of inherited territorial boundaries, the construction of ethnic identities, citizenship rights, and the viability of African states in the international system (Dauda 2007, p. 3).

To what extent can we compare the growth of the European state to the growth of the African state? How many ethnic (racial) and insurgent conflicts can we 'tolerate' as part and parcel of the growth process? Are there any external factors which perpetuate conflicts in the African political sphere? In their study of ethnic and insurgent conflicts between 1945 and 1999, Fearon and Laitan (2003 quoted in Dauda (2007, p. 7) found that there were roughly 127 civil wars that led to the death of a total of 16.2 million people. These produced refugee flows of far greater numbers than the death toll. Africa has certainly been an important theatre of these conflicts and carnage, with the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, Rwanda, and the Great Lakes region. Without undermining the enormity of the conflicts in the above-mentioned countries, indigenous versus 'white settlers' conflicts in Zimbabwe and the post election violence in Kenya could be recent additions to the list. Ethnic and racial tensions continue to be a nuisance in most African states.

While traditional and culturally diverse societies are prone to conflicts because of their primordial ethnic and religious diversity as well as ancient hatreds and animosities, Fearon

and Laitan (2003) found that the resurgence of civil strife in the 1990s has a lot to do with the onset of conditions that favour insurgency – technology of military conflict characterised by small, lightly armed bands practising guerrilla warfare from rural base areas (Dauda 2007, p. 7). In addition, the process of decolonisation from the 1940s until the 1970s led to the emergence of a large number of financially, bureaucratically, and militarily weak states, which had little control of their peripheries and were therefore vulnerable to warlordism, civil violence, and insurgency. According to Fearon and Laitan (2003) the conditions that favour insurgency include state weakness marked by poverty, a large population, and instability (Dauda 2007, p. 7-8). So for them, ethnic diversity is not the root cause of civil conflict, but insurgency and warlordism. Should we say, therefore, that for Fearon and Laitan (2003) Hutus and Tutsis hid behind ethnic differences as a reason for the Rwandan genocide? In our view, it could be both, but certainly ethnic diversity was the major cause.

The economic hypothesis posits that actors in conflicts are driven not only by identity considerations and the desire to maintain their autonomy *vis-à-vis* other groups, but above all that they have vital economic interests that drive them into prosecuting the conflict and exterminating their adversaries. Availability of economic resources such as oil, diamonds, gold, copper, lumber and other 'lootable' resources promote insurgency and conflict (Dauda 2007, p. 8). From this perspective, civil conflicts in several African countries are generated because of the insatiable greed of warlords and insurgents who want to make profits and loot the resources of the fragile postcolonial state (Dauda 2007, p. 8).

An important concept in the economic agenda that is crucial to our understanding of conflict in postcolonial states is the notion of 'grievance'. When a polity is endowed with economic resources and yet its citizenry languish in poverty and penury, then such a state is vulnerable to violence and conflicts because the people think that the state has been privatised into an oppressive predator, rather than a relatively autonomous entity that would protect the general interest of society (Dauda 2007, p. 8). Nigeria is one such state. It is the sixth largest oil-exporting country in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), but grievance seems to undergird the simmering crisis in the Niger Delta over control of oil resources (Dauda 2007, p. 8).

In summary, 'post-colonial ethnic and racial conflicts are fundamentally about citizenship rights, particularly the right to land, participatory inclusion in the political process and access to local resources as well as central state power' (Dauda 2007, p. 9).

The South African Political Community

The modern South African political community affords us the opportunity to evaluate the role of forgiveness in politics. South Africa, unlike other African countries, is one country whose present politics is grossly influenced by its past –that is, references to the evils of the Anglo-Boer War and Apartheid. In *The Politics of Memory and Forgetting After Apartheid*, Pieter Duvenage (2006, p. 509) starts by comparing and contrasting South Africa to post-war Germany. One essential difference is that 'apartheid was not a systematic attempt at extermination of a single ethnic group by the state, but rather the result of paternalistic intergroup relations.' Another significant difference is that there has been no historians' debate, in which philosophers and historians made it their intellectual, moral, and public task to wrestle with an evil past in order to secure a just future in a democracy (Duvenage 2006, p. 509). Nevertheless, like post-war Germany, South Africans, especially the whites, must ask uncomfortable questions about their past (Duvenage 2006, p. 509).

'Apartheid: by itself the word occupies the terrain like a concentration camp. System of partition, barbed wire, crowds of mapped out solitudes ... At every point, like all racisms, it tends to pass segregation off as natural – and as the very law of origin ... Even though it offers the excuse of blood, colour, birth ... racism always betrays the perversion of man, the "talking animal". It institutes, declares, writes, inscribes, prescribes. A system of marks, it outlines space in order to assign forced residence or to close off borders. It does not discern, it discriminates' (Derrida 1985 quoted in Duvenage 2006, p. 509-510). Derrida (1985) interprets apartheid, like Auschwitz, as a product of Western modernity. Although the very South African uniqueness of this catastrophe can be recognised, it is unsound to deny the historical roots of white South Africans and their specific 'European' way of life in Africa (Duvenage 2006, p. 509-510).

Nonetheless, instead of relativising past political evils, it is necessary that we address the past and put a proper 'mechanism' in place in order to avoid repeating history. The failure to deal with the past makes people fail to make political progress. In reference to the 26 000 Boer

women and children who perished in the British concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) in South Africa, Antjie Krog (1994 quoted in Duvenage 2006, p. 510) questions the extent to which the veiling of the concentration camp atrocities contributed to the type of character that devised the apartheid laws. What might have happened if the English had acknowledged their 'sin' and asked for forgiveness? In the face of this absence, 'those who experienced injustice' never entered into a discourse with the 'other'. To illustrate her point Krog (1994) quotes Totius: 'The wounds are healing as the years come and go, but that mark remains and keeps growing' (Duvenage 2006, p. 510). In her interpretation of this 'absence', Krog (1994) argues that it became a mythical pathology allowing a specific 'threatened group' to use any means, moral or immoral, to secure survival against the 'other' of apartheid. Krog (1994) argues that apartheid was successful in dividing South Africans to such an extent that all individuals and groups only have memories stemming from isolation, 'half-memories' which could easily turn into some dangerous present-day identity. Memory is identity and identity (containing distorted memories) could easily lead to new offences (Duvenage 2006, p 510). Like Krog (1994), J.R. Cochrane (in Duvenage 2006, p. 516, note 5) argues that there is no hope where the memory of suffering is silenced, leaving traces of suppressed dialogue. Since we cannot just move on, politically, as if all that happened did not matter, Krog (1994) argues in favour of a place where memories can be shared and communicated at a very basic level. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was set up to address such issues. However, the urgency of the victims' memory of the 'crimes against humanity' may imply for others the reliving of their ordeals, and hence their unwillingness to share their 'unfortunate' stories. Some victims may feel too embarrassed to narrate crimes such as rape and other sexual offences before the Truth and Reconciliation commission. This brings us to the question of how much of the past we can address.

Forgiveness – the Way Forward?

In view of the objectives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in most postcolonial African states, among which is the call to forgiveness of the colonial atrocities, we ask the question: to what extent is forgiveness a meaningful political activity? According to Jacques Derrida (2000, p. 81), forgiveness has nothing to do with the public or political sphere. He argues that, in principle, there is no limit to forgiveness, no measure, no moderation, no 'to what point?' But his problem is finding answers to the questions 'What is the meaning of forgiveness?'; 'What calls for forgiveness?'; 'What and whom do we forgive?'

Paradoxically, the only thing that is forgivable for Derrida is the unforgivable, such as monstrous crimes of the twentieth century (including colonial wars and apartheid, of course). These cruel and massive crimes have been archived by the 'universal conscience' and seem to escape from the measure of any human justice (Derrida 2000, p. 85). Jankelevitch (quoted in Derrida 2000, p. 85) declares that there would be no question of forgiving crimes against humanity, but against the power of forgiveness itself. Similarly Hegel argues that all is forgivable except the crime against spirit – against the reconciling power of forgiveness (Derrida 2000, p. 85). In the same fashion, Hannah Arendt maintained that the Nazi committed crimes against the power of forgiveness itself. Totalitarianism annihilated all forms of human action – speech and plurality – by isolating the individuals. Forgiveness is for Arendt a form of human action because it arises out of one's will. Individuals were deprived of opinion and will; hence 'forgiveness died in the death camps' (Derrida 2000, p. 88 quoting Jankelevitch).

Conversely, Derrida is of the opinion that forgiveness does not, should never, amount to a therapy of reconciliation. For South Africa, reconciliation was the best political move, without which the country would have been mired in fire and blood by vengeance (Derrida 2000, p. 90). But Derrida maintains that amnesty signifies acquittal, withdrawal of a case, or even 'grace', but it does not signify forgiveness. Forgiveness (following its Abrahamic religion) must engage two singularities: the guilty and victim. As soon as a third party intervenes, one can speak of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, but certainly not of pure forgiveness in the strict sense (Derrida 2000, p. 91).

Inspired by Derrida's provocative paradox – there is only forgiveness where there is the unforgivable – Holloway (2002, p. 54) argues that one does not have to be religious to believe in or practise forgiveness. He emphasises the point that the inability to forgive can be a sentence of psychic imprisonment that locks the person for ever into the remembrance of the original trespass. The inability or refusal to forgive, though it may be morally appropriate, always extends the reign of the original sin into the future, so that it can end up dominating a whole life or the life of a whole people. As it were, the 'original sin' regardless of how long ago it was committed, still scars the collective consciousness of whole communities and keeps them imprisoned in the past. Holloway (2002, p. 64) cites the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the continuous impact of the memory of slavery on race relations in the United States of

America. But for our present purposes, we can cite the continuing racial tensions in South Africa – 'black' discrimination (preferential treatment), or 'reverse apartheid' as others would like to call it, and of late the increasing levels of violence against white South Africans and even foreigners – arising from the memory of apartheid and its gruesome evils.

Friedrich Nietzsche is one thinker who knew better than anyone how the past can rob us of the future and how lives can be stunted by remembrance and sorrow. In his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche (quoted in Holloway 2002, p. 34) writes that 'in order to determine the extent and thereby the boundary point at which past things must be forgotten if they are not to become grave diggers of the present, one has to know the exact extent of the plastic energy of a person, of a people, of a culture; that is, the power to grow uniquely from within, to transform and incorporate the past and the unknown, to heal wounds, to replace what is lost, and to duplicate shattered structures from within ... There are people so lacking this energy that they bleed to death, as if from a tiny scratch, after a single incident, a single pain, and often in particular a single minor injustice.' Arendt as well argues that the past has power to deny a people the future, by imprisoning them in their own irreversible actions. She maintains that forgiveness is always of individuals, never of actions. It is true we cannot forgive actions for the simple reason that 'we must retain an attitude of disgust towards the offending act, if we are to justify the legitimate claims of human justice' (Holloway 2002, p. 36).

As already alluded to, Derrida claims that genuine forgiveness is between the guilty and the victim; when a third party like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission enters into the picture we cannot talk of forgiveness anymore. If the guilty does not realise his trespass and ask for forgiveness, any third-party mediation to that effect ruins the meaning of the act of forgiveness. What is more, guilt or trespass is not transferrable to future generations; similarly, survivors of the trespass and their future generations cannot claim to be victims on behalf of their long gone relatives. In South Africa, the apartheid guilt has assumed transference: the whole white South African community is automatically collectively guilty of the apartheid atrocities and the whole black community is the victim. But this mentality is never 'redemptive' to consciousness – it further imprisons people in the past, to the detriment of political progress.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission uses the 'Christian' confessional technique to try to bring the guilty and the victim to peace, but true forgiveness cannot be forced. Holloway (2002, p. 86) argues that 'only unconditional, impossible forgiveness can switch off the engine of madness and revenge and invite us, with infinite gentleness, to move on into the future' He sadly admits that 'unconditional forgiveness is beyond most of us, even though we believe it might be the very thing that could release us. It comes, when it comes at all, the way great genius suddenly visits us in extraordinary people' (Holloway 2002, p. 86). Nevertheless, Holloway (2002) praises the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa for successfully achieving amnesty using the 'confessional technique'. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chairperson of the Commission notes that 'South Africa would not be transformed overnight into the promised land flowing with milk and honey. Aspects of the old regime linger on; they hang over the bright era as a dark and sombre pall. The pernicious and debilitating legacy of apartheid, firmly entrenched for a long half century and enforced with ruthless efficiency, is going to be with us for many a long day yet' (Tutu 1999, p. 22). 'Many South Africans had terrible memories of the apartheid years; on all sides it was agreed that we had to take this history, this past, seriously into account. We could not pretend that it had not happened. Much of it was too fresh in the memories of many communities. There was in fact hardly any controversy about whether we should deal effectively with our past if we were going to be making the transition to a new dispensation. No, the debate was not on *whether* but on *how* we might deal with this only-too-real past' (Tutu 1999, p. 24).

Tutu (1999, p. 31), like other thinkers discussed earlier, also notes that 'the past, far from disappearing, or lying down and being quiet, is embarrassingly persistent, and will return and haunt us unless it has been dealt with adequately. Unless we look the beast in the eye, we will find that it returns to hold us hostage.' Failure to let go of the past poses massive obstacles to relationships between perpetrators and victims because in one way or the other they have to live together (especially in the case of South African blacks and whites). Tutu cites the Jews (modern Israelis) in explaining his stance: 'The Jews accept substantial compensation being paid as reparation by European governments and institutions for complicity in the Holocaust. They cannot forgive on behalf of those who suffered and died in the past. If we accept this argument then logic would seem to dictate that those who did not suffer directly ... should also be incapable of receiving compensation on behalf of others' (Tutu 1999, p. 225). Tutu mentions that, unlike the Jews and though controversial, Africans forgave Europeans for the

sordidness of the slave trade, through which 140 million people died.[14] In trying to deal with a sordid past and building a new kind of world community, Tutu suggests that perpetrators or their descendants must acknowledge the horror of what happened and descendants of victims grant the forgiveness asked for. True forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible. We cannot go on nursing grudges, even vicariously, for those who cannot speak for themselves any longer (Tutu 1999, p. 226).

As mentioned earlier, one need not be religious to believe in or practise forgiveness. At any rate, even if 'the victim' chooses not to 'forgive', the burden of guilt weighs down heavily on him, locking him forever in the prison of the past. Most Africans who have suffered atrocities in the liberation movements or in ethnic and racial conflict need to choose whether to live in the past or accept fate – as Nietzsche would put it, *amor fati*. Most of the freedoms that human beings all over the world now enjoy did not come without a price – many people lost their lives. Even during the liberation struggles in most African countries, a lot of people who fought for our liberation lost their lives – we now read and tell their stories, as of national heroes. Instead of fighting for justice on behalf of the fallen national heroes, we need concerted efforts to nurture the hard-earned freedom by accepting the past and living in the present. Hannah Arendt argues in her *On Revolution* that liberty is only a condition of freedom. Liberation means to be free from oppression. 'Nobody would ever be able to arrive at a place where freedom rules if he could not move without restraint.' In my assessment, Africans are yet to be free. We cannot claim to be free just because we have adopted democratic freedoms. While the African continent has been liberated from colonial oppression and apartheid, I submit that African peoples are in dire need of mental liberation – or mindset shift – before they can be 'free indeed'. Until then, Africans may fail to understand and hence fail to find fulfilment in meaningful political action because of a psychological hold on the past.

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[14] In our view, forgiveness is a central concept in politics, particularly African politics. Given the African political experience at the hands of the colonialists and its consequences in the African public political sphere, forgiveness is the only feasible way forward to meaningful political experience in the postcolonial African continent. Yet forgiveness is a non-ideological act. The moment it becomes a command, it loses its spontaneity. Meaningful forgiveness is spontaneous, freely arising from one's will.

CHAPTER FOUR

DELINEATING THE PUBLIC SPHERE OF POLITICS IN MODERNITY

'The disappearance of the gulf that the ancients had to cross daily to transcend the narrow realm of the household and "rise" into the realm of politics is an essentially modern phenomenon.'

> – Arendt 1958, p. 33.

The foregoing chapters have demonstrated that the events of the twentieth century were hard on mankind worldwide, so much so that man lost meaning and purpose in life. Totalitarian regimes took advantage of this *human condition* to subdue the human capacity for political action, thereby eliminating the public sphere of politics. Totalitarian tendencies, however discreet, are present even in modern liberal democracies. The present chapter reasserts the categorical distinction between the private and the public spheres as the only way to salvage the public sphere of politics in the twenty-first century. It argues that the political is what makes us fittingly human and free. Since the dawn of modernity, the distinction between the private and the public has been blurred, and as a result politics has become *biopolitics* (Agamben 1998), that is, the politics of life. Reinstating this distinction is significant because it helps us locate the sphere of politics, which is, as a matter of fact, the sphere of freedom. The chapter starts with a general discussion of the public/private dichotomy from the perspective of a handful of theorists, but our main theorist is Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), who uses the dichotomy to explain our political situation in modernity. Arendt placed great emphasis on political action in the public sphere, and maintained that freedom was characteristic of public rather than private life. Arendt's political theory presupposes the antithesis of nature and politics, and of the private and the public; the public realm is for Arendt the opposite of that which is private, natural, and removed from the common (Dossa 1989, p. 65).

Discussions of the public/private dichotomy, and notions concerning what is 'public' and what is 'private', can be traced much further back into the past. In the fully developed Greek city-state, the sphere of the *polis,* which was common (*koine*) to the free citizens, was strictly separated from the sphere of the *oikos*; in the sphere of the *oikos*, each individual was in his

own realm (*idia*). The public life, *bios politikos*, went on in the market place (*agora*), but of course this did not mean that it occurred necessarily only in this specific locale. The public sphere was constituted in discussion (*lexis*), which could also assume the forms of consultation and of sitting in the court of law, as well as in common action (*praxis*), be it the waging of war or competition in athletic games (Habermas 1989, p. 3).

The private sphere was attached to the house not by (its Greek) name only; movable wealth and control over labour power were no more substitutes for being the master of a household and of a family than, conversely, poverty and a lack of slaves would in themselves prevent admission to the *polis* (Habermas 1989, p. 3). Exile, expropriation, and the destruction of the house amounted to one and the same thing. Status in the *polis* was therefore based upon status as the unlimited master of an *oikos*. The reproduction of life, the labour of the slaves, and the service of the women went on under the aegis of the master's domination; birth and death took place in its shadow, and the realm of necessity and transitoriness remained immersed in the obscurity of the private sphere (Habermas 1989, p. 3). In contrast to it stood, in Greek self-interpretation, the public sphere as a realm of freedom and permanence. Only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed; did everything become visible to all (Habermas 1989, p. 3).

Since then, the distinction between public and private has been a central and characteristic preoccupation of Western thought and has long served as a point of entry into many of the key issues of social and political analysis, of moral and political debate, and of the ordering of everyday life (Weintraub & Kumar 1997, p. 1). 'The public/private distinction stands out as one of the "grand dichotomies" of Western thought, in the sense of a binary opposition that is used to subsume a wide range of other important distinctions and that attempts ... to dichotomise the social universe in a comprehensive and sharply demarcated way' (Weintraub & Kumar 1997, p. 1). The use of the conceptual vocabulary of 'public' and 'private' often generates as much confusion as illumination, not least because different sets of people who employ these concepts mean different things by them and sometimes, without realising it, mean different things at once (Weintraub & Kumar 1997, p. 2). The widespread invocation of 'public' and 'private' as organising categories is not usually informed by careful consideration of the meaning and implications of the concepts themselves. For example, many discussions take for granted that distinguishing 'public' from 'private' is equivalent to

establishing the boundary of the political – though it makes a considerable difference whether the political is conceived in terms of the administrative state or of the public sphere (Weintraub & Kumar 1997, p. 2).

Within sociology, there has been considerable debate over the different meanings and applications of the public/private dichotomy in terms of state administration and market economy; collective/individual interests; family/market economy, and so on. In her paper *There's No Place Like Home: The Public/Private Distinction in Children's Theorising of Risk and Safety* Harden (2000, pp. 43-59) specially looks at how children construct their lives around this distinction: ' They reflexively construct their landscapes of risk and safety around concepts of private, local, and public. While the private sphere of the home was described by children in terms of safety and security, they expressed concerns about their vulnerability in public life. The children's accounts also define an intermediate sphere between private and public – the local sphere – which was identified in terms of proximity to the home and familiarity with places and people.'

In his book, *Democracy and Dictatorship: The Nature and Limits of State Power*, Noberto Bobbio (1989, p. 1-2) observes that: 'It was in two much commented-upon passages of Justinian's *Corpus Iuris* where public law and private law are defined in an identical manner that the pair of the terms "public" and "private" first entered the history of Western political and social thought. Through constant and continuous use, and without any substantial changes, they have since become one of the "great dichotomies" used by several disciplines ... to define, represent and order their particular fields of investigation. The terms of a dichotomy can either be defined independently of each other, or else only one is defined while the other is defined negatively with respect to it (peace as not war), (private as not public) and rarely as the other way round (war as not peace). It can be said that the two terms of a dichotomy qualify each other in the sense that they always occur together, for example in legal language, public laws suggest instantly private law. In ordinary language, the public interest is determined with respect to and by contrast with private interest ... From the moment that the space defined by the two terms is completely covered (*tertium non datur*) they arrive at the point of mutually defining themselves in the sense that the public domain extends only as far as the start of the private sphere (and the reverse is also true). The size of the areas referred to by either of the terms can be enlarged or reduced depending on the situation to

which the dichotomy is applied ... Increasing the size of the public sphere reduces the private sphere and vice versa.'

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989, p. xi), Jurgen Harbermas locates the public sphere between civil society and the state: 'The liberal public sphere took shape in the specific historical circumstances of a developing market economy. In its clash with the arcane and bureaucratic practices of the absolutist state, the emergent bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere in which the ruler's power was merely represented before the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people.' Habermas distinguishes several types of public sphere. *Öffentlichkeit* is the political public sphere, the literary public sphere, and representative publicness. *Intimsphäre*, the intimate sphere, denotes the core of a person's private sphere which by law, tact, and convention is shielded from intrusion (Habermas 1989, p. xvi). It may not be appropriate at this point to equate the *Intimsphäre* with the private sphere. As we will see later on, Arendt shows us how the sphere of the intimate arose at a later stage in history, not as the opposite of the public but of the social.

We agree with Weintraub above that the notions of public and private have been invoked widely and in diverse disciplines regardless of the meaning and implications of the concepts themselves. However, our present discussion does not take for granted that distinguishing the public from the private is equivalent to establishing the boundary of the political. In fact, what animates our discussion is the conception of the public sphere in terms of the political, the realm of freedom, as opposed to the private sphere, the realm of housekeeping and administration of the necessities of life – be it at the household level or national level.

Hannah Arendt on the Public and the Private

The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state; but the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the Modern Age and which found its political form in the nation-state (Arendt 1958, p. 28). Habermas (1989, p. 46) observes that Arendt refers to the *private sphere of society that has become publicly relevant* when she characterises the modern relationship of

the public sphere to the private in terms of the rise of the social. Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance, and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public.

For Arendt (1958, p.p. 29-31) the public and private distinction was self-evident and axiomatic to ancient political thought. What prevented the *polis* from violating the private lives of its citizens and made it hold sacred the boundaries surrounding each property was not respect for private property as we understand it, but the fact that without owning a house a man could not participate in the affairs of the world because he had no location in it which was properly his own. The distinctive trait of the household sphere was that in it men lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs. The driving force was life itself, which, for its individual maintenance and its survival as the life of the species, needs the company of others. Natural community in the household was therefore born of necessity, and necessity ruled over all the activities performed in it. On the contrary, the realm of the *polis* was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the *polis* (Arendt 1958, p. 31).

What all Greek philosophers took for granted is that **freedom** is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is primarily a pre-political phenomenon, characteristic of the private household organisation, and that force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity and to become free. Arendt defines violence as the pre-political act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of the world. The pre-political force with which the head of the household ruled over the family and its slaves, and which was felt to be necessary because man is a 'social' animal before he is a 'political' animal, is not the same as the chaotic state of nature from whose violence men could escape only by establishing a government that, through a monopoly of power and of violence, would abolish the 'war of all against all' (Arendt 1958, p. 32). The whole concept of rule and being ruled, of government and power in the sense which we understand them, was felt to be pre-political and to belong in the private rather than the public sphere (Arendt 1958, p. 32).

Another central feature of the *polis* is the concept of **equality**. The *polis* was a space for only 'equals'. To be free meant to be subject neither to the necessity of life nor to the command of another; it meant neither to rule nor to be ruled. The equality of the political realm has very little in common with our modern concept of equality; it meant to live among and to have to deal only with one's peers, and it presupposed the existence of 'unequals' who, as it were, were always the majority of the population in the city-state. Equality, far from being connected with justice as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed (Arendt 1958, p. 33).

In the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself. The emergence of society has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen. For the ancients, a man who lived only a private life was not fully human. In modernity, we no longer think primarily of deprivation when we use the word 'privacy', and this is partly due to the enormous enrichment of the private sphere through modern individualism. Modern privacy in its most relevant function, to shelter the intimate, was discovered as the opposite of the 'social', and not the political. The intimacy of the heart, unlike the private household, has no objective tangible place in the world, nor can the society against which it protests and asserts itself be localised with the same certainty as the public space (Arendt 1958, p. 39).

The Greeks were quite aware of the fact that the *polis*, with its emphasis on speech and action, could survive only if the number of citizens remained restricted. Large numbers of people crowded together develop an almost irresistible inclination toward despotism. Arendt employs the law of statistics to politics to emphasise a crucial political point: every increase in population means an increased validity and a marked decrease of 'deviation'. Politically, this means that the larger the population in any given body politic, the more likely that it will be the social rather than the political that constitutes the public realm (Arendt 1958, p. 45).

One of the outstanding characteristics of the realm of society is its tendency to grow and devour the older realms of the political and private as well as the more recently established

sphere of intimacy. The realm of society has transformed all modern communities into societies of labourers and jobholders – all centred around the one activity necessary to sustain life. Whether an activity is performed in private or public is by no means a matter of indifference. Obviously, the character of the public realm must change in accordance with the activities admitted into it, but to a large extent the activity itself changes its own nature too (Arendt 1958, p. 46).

Arendt (1958, p. 52) uses the word public in two related senses: *first*, something is public if it can be seen and heard by everybody, and has the widest possible publicity. In this case, appearance constitutes reality. She acknowledges 'a great many things' which cannot withstand the implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene. She gives the example of love. In distinction from friendship, 'love is extinguished the moment it is displayed in public. Because of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false and perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world.' What the public sphere considers unfit for the public, the irrelevant, can have such an extraordinary and infectious charm that a whole people may adopt it as their way of life, without for that reason changing its essentially private character. The enlargement of the private sphere in modernity does not constitute a public realm, but on the contrary, means that the public realm has almost completely receded,[15] so that greatness has given way to charm everywhere; for while the public realm may be great, it cannot be charming precisely because it is unable to harbour the irrelevant (Arendt 1958, p. 52).

The *second* use of the world 'public' signifies the world itself, insofar as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it. Not synonymous with the earth or nature, this world is related to the human artefact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every *in-between*, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other. What makes mass society difficult to bear is not

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[15] This point is well noted by Noberto Bobbio (1989) in *Democracy and Dictatorship: The Nature and Limits of State Power*, pp. 1–2, where he argues that increasing the size of the public sphere reduces the private sphere and vice versa. In modernity we can justifiably say that the private sphere has been enlarged, even though it does not constitute a public realm as Arendt argues.

the number of people involved, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them (Arendt 1958, p. 53).

A public sphere, or the common world, for Arendt, must transcend the lifespan of mortal men; without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no public realm, is possible. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike: it is the publicity of the public realm which can absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever men may want to save from the natural ruin of time. Arendt argues that there is no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the Modern Age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality.[16]

For Arendt, reality in the common world is guaranteed not primarily by the 'common nature' of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object, *the common world* (Arendt 1958, p. 57). If the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men can prevent the destruction of the common world, which is usually preceded by the destruction of the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality. Radical isolation, where nobody can any longer agree with anybody else, and 'herd mentality', deprive men of seeing and hearing each other by imprisoning them in their own singular experience.[17] The end of the common world has come when it is seen only from one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective, as is usually the case in tyrannies (Arendt 1958, p. 58). The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others; as far as they are concerned, private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist; whatever he does remains of no significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to other people (Arendt 1958, p. 58). In our age, this deprivation of 'objective' relationships to others and of a reality guaranteed through them has become the mass phenomenon of loneliness, where it has assumed its most extreme and most anti-human form (Arendt 1958, p. 59).

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[16] The modern self seeks immortality in the private realm through the idolisation of the body. In *Body Politics: Why Are We Obsessed With Our Flesh?* Bowler, S. (2005) argues that the cultural fascination with corpses, plastic surgery, and healthy living suggests that we are objectifying ourselves. The body in modernity has become the most mediated, attuned to priorities beyond the self in the hope that this will *put some flesh on the bones of the self*.

[17] The use of Nietzsche's term, *herd animal*, here better captures the attitude of the masses in today's society. Arendt observes quite frankly that *they* behave as though they were members of one family.

The relationship between the private and public is profound. While the interior of the private realm remained hidden and of no public significance, its exterior appearance was important for the ancient city-state, as it appeared in the realm of the city through the boundaries between one household and the other. The law was originally identified with this boundary line, which was actually a space, a kind of no-man's-land between the private and the public, sheltering both realms while, at the same time, separating them from each other. This is the boundary where the public and the private inevitably meet. Without it a public realm could no more exist than a piece of property without a fence to hedge it in; the one harboured and enclosed political life as the other sheltered and protected the biological process of the family (Arendt 1958, p. 63-64).

Privacy was like the other, the dark and hidden side of the public realm, and while to be political meant to attain the highest possibility of human existence, to have no private place of one's own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human (Arendt 1958, p. 64). The relationship of the private to the public is manifest on its most elementary level in the question of private property. While Arendt admits that this connection came in later and had a different origin, private wealth as a source of one's livelihood became politically significant. Private wealth became a condition for admission to public life, not because its owner was engaged in accumulating it, but because it assured with reasonable certainty that its owner would not have to engage in providing for himself the means of use and consumption and was free for public activity. Public life was possible only after the much more urgent needs of life had been taken care of. To own property therefore meant to be master over one's own necessities of life and therefore potentially to be a free person, free to transcend his own life and enter the world all have in common (Arendt 1958, p. 64-65).

In our view, most Africans, beset by poverty and homelessness inside their own countries, are servants of necessity and they have a long way to go before they can truly be politically free!

Implications of the Arendtian Divide

Not every individual was a citizen, or a *politician*, in ancient Greece. By virtue of their very small population, it was possible to have a *polis*, or a public sphere, in the strictest sense of the word. Given that modernity has granted citizenship status to every individual born in a

particular state, not everyone can rightly be called a politician, as in member of a *polis*. To our own credit, we nevertheless seem to have a vague notion of a politician because there are only a select few who are referred to as politicians. This notwithstanding, the term is grossly abused for the reason that not all the *select few* that are referred to as politicians in our day have mastered the necessities of life. Not all appear to others in the sphere of appearance to engage in discursive and constructive debates. Most of our politicians use the public sphere to provide for themselves and their families the means of use and consumption. This is abuse of the public sphere which we can blame on the merging of the public and private in our age. It was not far-fetched for Agamben (1998) to argue that in modernity politics is irredeemably lost in biopolitics. It looks like a hopeless situation to try to recover politics from oblivion; it is like trying to turn back the hands of time, to undo and rewrite history when we fully know that history is not just the extraordinary events, but it also encompasses a people's consciousness at any given period. Nevertheless, it is not just the romanticism of the past that drives Arendt to redraw the public and the private spheres in modernity. Knowing that it is impossible to save the past as a whole after the collapse of tradition, Arendt tries to redeem from oblivion only those elements of the past that are still able to illuminate our situation.

How does Arendt redeem the Dichotomy in Modernity?

Arendt endeavours to reconstruct the nature of political experience – the nature of politics and political life. She employs the phenomenological return to the things themselves, aiming by such investigation to make available the objective structures and characteristics of political *being-in-the-world*, as distinct from other forms of life – such as moral, practical, artistic, and productive (Yar 2005). Her explication of the constitutive features of the *vita activa* (labour, work, and action) can be viewed as the phenomenological uncovering of the structures of human action *qua* existence and experience, rather than abstract conceptual constructions or empirical generalisations about what people typically do (Yar 2005).

For Arendt humans are a part of nature and subject to its necessity, but at the same time they are able to transcend it and freely carry out their actions. She divided human activity into labour, work, and action. Labour is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced by labour (Arendt 1958, p. 7). In other words, labour refers to the activities centred on the reproduction and nurturing of life. Work refers to activities in

which human beings control nature and interpose a durable and distinctively human world between themselves and nature (Parekh 1998). Work provides an 'artificial' world of things, distinctively different from all natural surroundings (Arendt 1958, p. 7). It includes such things as building houses, crafts, writing books, painting pictures, and composing music. Insofar as man engages in labour he is according to Arendt *animal laborans*, and insofar as he engages in work he is *homo faber*. Action is the unique expression of the human capacities of freedom and transcendence. It is uniquely interpersonal and refers to activities in which human beings transcend nature, interact with others, begin something new, and make a distinct mark upon the world (Arendt 1958, p. 7). Action includes such things as speaking, arguing, persuading, standing up for a cause and protesting against evil.

Drawing from the Greek, in particular Aristotelian, concept of life as divided into *zoe* and *bios*, Arendt indicates that *zoe* refers to the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, gods) – mere reproductive life – and is confined to the sphere of the *oikos* (household). The human activity devoted to the subsistence and preservation of *zoe* is labour. *Bios* is a qualified life which belongs to the political realm of the *polis*. It is the more significant dimension for uncovering the political nature of man in our age. According to Arendt, the political life provides such necessary preconditions of action as a plurality of participants, publicity, public space and the possibility of immortal fame. The political community provides the means by which man can actualise his full potential of human existence.

Parekh (1998) demonstrates that the classical city-states of Athens and Rome respected the hierarchy of the *vita activa* and nurtured a climate conducive to action, freedom, and meaningfulness. They gave superiority to the human activity of action. The late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age gave superiority to the human activity of work, as shown in the era of the Industrial Revolution. However, modernity, whose highest good is life itself, has reversed the hierarchy of the *vita activa* and has given pre-eminence to the human activity of labour. But why is the labouring activity elevated to the highest rank of man's capacities? Why, within the diversity of the human condition with its various human capacities, was it life that overruled all other considerations? Arendt suggests that the reason why life asserted itself as the ultimate point of reference in the Modern Age, and has remained the highest good of modern society, is that the modern reversal operated within the fabric of life of the

Christian society, whose fundamental belief in the sacredness of life has survived secularisation and the general decline of the Christian faith (Arendt 1958, p. 313-314). Political activity, which up to then had derived its greatest inspiration from the aspiration to immortality, now sank to the low level of activity subject to necessity. For Arendt (1958, p. 313-314) the Christian belief in the immortality of the individual human life had reversed the ancient relationship between man and world and promoted the most mortal thing, human life, to the position of immortality. This Modern Age, according to Arendt, continues to operate under the assumption that life, and not *the common world,* is the highest good of man; in its revisions and criticisms of traditional beliefs and concepts, the Modern Age never thought of challenging this fundamental reversal which Christianity had brought to the ancient world. The priority of life over everything else has acquired for the Modern Age the status of a self-evident truth; it has even survived in our present society of jobholders.[18] The transformation and decadence of the political realm in modern societies is due to the primacy of natural life over political action.

Delineating the Public Sphere in Modernity

The realm of shared public space, within which the citizen is constituted, has disappeared in our age. What has taken its place is the individual existing in public only in the most abstract and generalised form (Sassi 1996 quoting Seligman 1992, p. 32). Seligman (1992) proposes that in lieu of the public the private is projected into the public arena, and made public. He submits that scholars unanimously admit that there is need for a more nuanced analysis of the public/private distinction, although the way of defining these spheres may vary markedly. On the other hand, any theory of public, public sphere, and publicity presupposes a distinction between the public and the private, since the public sphere rests on the distinction. Suggestions to include the formerly excluded publics into the public arena are, of course, justified, as are the appeals to transform the boundaries between private and public issues (Sassi 1996 quoting Seligman 1992, p. 32).

From the perspective of political action and the conduct of everyday activities, a distinction between the public and private issues should remain, although between these oppositional terms a grey area of mixed qualities may arise (Sassi 1996). While there are those who, like

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[18]Arendt demonstrates that the Modern Age of emphasis on labour is already being replaced by a society of jobholders. The motive behind the jobs is to nurture life itself.

Arendt, argue for the restoration of the distinction between the private and the public, others, like Marx, argue that 'the splitting of man into public and private' divides and debilitates the souls of individuals in bourgeois society, and look to a time when social force is no longer separated from the individual as political power (Schwartz 1979, p. 246). According to Schwartz (1979, p. 24), Marx's criticism of the narrowness of political thought may suggest a complete rejection of 'the political' in favour of 'the social' sphere. One can plausibly argue that Marx ultimately rejects 'politics' and 'the political' as a distinctive sphere of life, and seeks to dissolve it back into the economy. Arendt is, however, wary of the realm of the social for the reason that Marx's turn to the social as a locus for liberation represents a return to the realm of necessity.

In our view, there are considerable differences between Arendt's and Marx's use of the concepts 'politics', 'power', etc., which make it difficult to compare and contrast their political philosophies without misrepresenting their thought. Nevertheless, it is apparent that in our age the dividing line between the private and the public is entirely blurred because politics has become life administration. Restoring this dividing line is the starting point to recovery of the political in modern man. For Arendt, modernity is essentially characterised by the loss of the common world, the *in-between* that both separates and unites the people around it. Modern man has been alienated from the world.

David (2009) could not have described this predicament any better. In his blog, *Life's Private Book*, he argues that in becoming modern, man discovered the world but lost himself. Man in his specific difference as the knower has disappeared from view; he has been lost. David (2009) argues that the modern world in peculiarly inhuman: 'The specific difference of man is that he is a knowing animal, and to exclude him as knower is to exclude his humanity. But although man the knower has disappeared from view in the modern world, he still exists in the modern world. His existence is merely suppressed. The eruption of man as knower is therefore always a threat to the modern world, and any such eruption would pose a foundational crisis for modernity in a way that it never did for the ancients. The specific inhumanity of the modern world is therefore the suppression of man as knower.' David (2009) observes that 'this suppression is most evident in modern totalitarian ideologies, which typically style themselves as "scientific". And while it may be argued whether such ideologies are in fact truly scientific, they are certainly scientific (in the modern sense) insofar

as they explicitly exclude man in his subjectivity as a knower. For the scientist in his lab, knowledge exists only in the results of his scientific method, not in what he knows immediately as a man – for instance, that he himself is a knower who necessarily transcends whatever experiment he is performing. For the scientific ideologue, knowledge exists only in the results of the scientific ideology, not in what people know immediately as men. Thus Nazi concentration camp guards sometimes experienced the revulsion of their individual consciences, but dismissed conscience as a subjective experience of no cognitive value. The truth was understood objectively through Nazi scientific ideology, not individual conscience, and "courage" consisted in suppressing the pain of conscience in favour of what needed to be done in light of Nazism' (David 2009). 'The sinister genius of modern totalitarianism is that it works primarily through getting men to *themselves* suppress the knower in themselves.[19] Through propaganda, re-education, lies, and total control of all media, the modern totalitarian exploits the gap between man and his knowledge by inserting the totalitarian ideology into it. Man becomes convinced that he can know only *through* ideology. Anything he might think he knows independently of ideology – such as the truths of ordinary conscience – are illusions of false consciousness. Morality consists of reshaping the self in the terms demanded by ideology. Most men cannot resist the power of ideology and suppress themselves in its name' (David 2009).

Delineating the public sphere of politics in modernity is, therefore, not an easy undertaking. It requires that we purge the narcissistic consciousness of the modern self and equip him with tools to reclaim his objective relationship to the common world, which will eventually reinstate him as the knower. In our view, it is the political nature in man, which finds fulfilment in the public sphere of politics, that can restore the status of modern man as human, the knower. The public sphere of politics, as Arendt argues, demands that men be seen and heard by others. In our age, this necessary condition has become unattainable because the millions of citizens that constitute our states cannot assemble in one place to be *seen and*

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[19] David observes that the ancient tyrant was straightforwardly brutal and propelled by obvious human motivation: the thirst for power, glory, and wealth; the satisfaction of his human appetites. His methods were not subtle or secret. If he slaughtered the inhabitants of a captured city, he advertised the fact as a warning to anyone who would oppose him. It was the *truth* about himself that made him powerful, the truth that he was a ruthless and ambitious tyrant. He oppressed man in his physical nature, but he did not oppress him in his knowing nature. The modern tyrant has discovered the power of the lie, the power of the suppression of man the knower. For instance, Stalin murdered millions, but also had millions convinced that he was the greatest benefactor in Russian history.

heard by the others. It is the flourishing of the mass media in modernity that offers a grand opportunity for citizens to be symbolically *seen and heard* by others. In our view, mass media is the public sphere in the sense of being accessible to almost everyone at any given time; nevertheless, it is not in itself *essentially* political.

The public sphere is an accessible and independent realm in which each voice is equal to every other voice; it is the means by which democratic decisions are reached. Gilward (1993, p. 65) argues that the mass media functions as a public sphere, representative of the citizenry and accessible to all. 'It serves as a key barometer of democracy within a polity. The character of democracy is dependent on the flow of information. This in turn determines the degree to which the citizenry can take decisions based on informed decisions and make government accountable. From the traditional liberal position, the public sphere is an arena between the distinct areas of state and civil society that guarantees the protection of the individual. Liberal theory equates the public sphere with the political domain and the public role of the media is defined in relation to government. Radical democratic theorists reject the way the distinction is made between the private and the public realms, which underpins the liberal definition of the public sphere. The mediation role of the press and broadcasting is said to extend to all areas where power is exercised over others, the workplace and the home' (Gillward 1993, p. 65).

Peter Dahlgren (1991) quoted in Gillward (1993, p. 67) contends that the public sphere should not simply be understood as the processes of public opinion or as a synonym for the mass media. He draws on Jurgen Habermas notion of the public sphere: that is, a realm between the state and civil society where decisions are publicly reached through rational discourse. He identifies the time of the nineteenth-century Press in England as the golden era of the public sphere, in which a plurality of ideas was aired in a context free from both state and capital intervention. For Habermas, this becomes undermined through the concentration of media, the dominance of advertising and public relations, which sell ideas rather than debate them. This situation is compounded by the entry of the state (through anti-monopoly acts or state-sponsored media) into this realm to prevent the domination of capital, with the devastating effect of blurring the public/private realm (Gillward 1993, p. 67).

The Media as a Democratic Public Sphere in Capitalistic Society

Curran (1991, p. 41, quoted in Gillward 1993) argues that Habermas overstates his conception of the nineteenth-century public sphere as a golden age of the rational discourse. Recent historical research indicates that the press in the latter half of the nineteenth century was factional, insular and limited, consisting of small, polemical, destructively competitive publications. Habermas's portrayal of the bourgeois public sphere is an 'ideological distortion' (Dahlgren 1991, p. 2 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 67). Gillward (1993) observes that though media theorists have preferred to draw on Habermas's explicit media application, probably the most independent exponent on the revitalisation of the public sphere is Hannah Arendt. A return to Arendt's work is very rewarding. It is crucial in explaining the public sphere as the provider of communicative power from the governed to the governors. Applying Arendt's notion of the public realm to the media provides a way of conceptualising its political role in modern society, outside both the state and the dominant interests in civil society. For Arendt, the fundamental phenomenon of power is not the 'instrumentalisation of another's will, but the formation of a common will in a communication directed to reaching agreement' (Habermas 1986, p. 78 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 68). Arendt demonstrates that power is built up on communicative action; it is a collective effort of speech in which reaching agreement is an end in itself for all those involved. A public political realm can produce legitimate power only while 'structures of undistorted communication find their expression in it.' 'Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence' (Habermas 1986, p. 78 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 68). A vital public realm is, as it were, what distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate power. Arendt identifies the collapse of the public sphere as a central feature of the modern world and views the crisis of democracy in these terms. This is evident in the trend in representative democracies of advanced societies towards citizen apathy, alienation, and anomie (Phillips 1991, p. 16 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 68). The effect of this is that politics has become less a matter of active citizenship and more a question of rules. Without the endorsement of public debate, the decisions by political leaders lack legitimacy.

Inseparably linked to the idea of participation in Arendt's thesis is that of education. These twin concepts are particularly pertinent in considering a democratic role for the media. Arendt's notion of the public realm refers to a durable common world that provides the physical context within which political action can arise. But it also refers to something much

more fragile and transitory, 'the space of appearance', which must be continually recreated by action (d'Entreves 1989, p. 3-5 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 68). For Arendt, this is the basis of participation. The sharing of power that comes from civic engagement and common deliberation can provide each citizen with a sense of effective political agency. Arendt's notion of participatory democracy represents an attempt to reactivate the experience of citizenship and to articulate the conditions for the exercise of effective political agency. Arendt argues that the reactivation of the public sphere depends upon both the recovery of the common, shared world and the creation of numerous spaces of appearance in which individuals can disclose their identities and establish relations of reciprocity and solidarity (d'Entreves 1989, p. 2 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 68) as equal citizens. Democracy for Arendt means more than changing structures. It means also schooling citizens in citizenship – the varied skills and values that are essential to sustaining effective participation (d'Entreves 1989, p. 17 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 68). However, Arendt's notion of training citizens does not sufficiently deal with the substantive barriers to equal political participation posed by social inequality. She appears to ignore the social factors that contribute to the success in 'exercising a lasting authority' over others. Le Fort (1988, p. 53 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 68) points out that Arendt seems convinced the exchange of words in itself is egalitarian. It cannot transmit any inequality of power. It is precisely with such barriers to democratic participation that radical democratic theorists are concerned. In our view, Arendt was not oblivious to the fact of social inequality. In her description of the nature of the *polis*, she states that it is a place for only equals, 'the free' – only those who have mastered the necessities of life. It is our view that by social inequality Le Fort (1988) refers to such necessities of life that Arendt noted. At some point it was a requirement for free individuals that they own property and that they have the means for sustaining their lives. A free person was not expected to labour in order to provide for his family's necessities. Thus, Arendt excluded from politics all those who are yet under the yoke of labour.

Political equality is inconsistent with social arrangements that deprive many large sectors of society of the chance to make decisions (Phillips 1991, p. 38 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 68). The question of structural inequalities as opposed to formal ones is where the challenge lies for media development. The media in all its forms provides an obvious conduit for democratic participation and education. This requires a formal media policy if it is going to contribute to the reactivation of the public sphere, independent from state of capital

domination. For instance, the media have already gone some way to revealing the hidden issues of the private sphere specifically for women, through popular magazines and programmes. However, as Phillip (1991) contends, democratising the corners of the private realm is not the solution to democratising society. For this, the revitalisation of the public realm is essential – 'the greatest crime of liberalism was that it turned the activism of citizenship to the service of private interest or desires and emptied politics of public importance' (Phillips 1991, p. 16 quoted in Gillward 1993, p. 68). The solution, she argues, like Arendt and Hegel before her, is to re-establish the political as what makes us human and free (Gillward 1993, p. 70).

Re-establishing the public/private dichotomy in our age is indispensable for meaningful political action. The public sphere of politics is the sphere of human actualisation and fulfilment. Conversely, the liberal democratic concept of individuality militates against the self-actualisation of man by championing a problematic concept of freedom and equality, which further annihilates the political in modern man. A review of Arendt's concept of freedom is appropriate in restoring meaningful political activity. In the next chapter we will demonstrate that freedom and equality belong to the public sphere of politics and not to the private sphere as liberal theorists have taught.

CHAPTER FIVE

REDEFINING POLITICAL FREEDOM

'Men *are* free – as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom – as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same.'

– Arendt, H 2006a, p. 151.

The preceding chapter has demonstrated Hannah Arendt's passion to reconstruct the nature of politics and political life. Arendt argues that restoring the categorical distinction between the private and the public spheres is the only way to redeem politics in our age. Of the three human activities – labour, work, and action – Arendt claims that action is the condition of all political life. The present chapter builds on the foregoing to argue that action is the unique expression of the human capacity for freedom. Freedom is, therefore, not the ability to choose from a set of different alternatives, but rather freedom means the capacity to begin something new, which is rooted in *natality*, the fact of birth. The question of freedom for Hannah Arendt presents a challenge to modern ways of considering it. Freedom is essentially a public phenomenon: we can only become aware of it or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves. Freedom as action discloses the identity of the agents – their unique individuality, which is the essence of difference; it is through action that individuals reveal themselves as unique individuals and disclose to the world their distinct personalities. Action is the most significant factor that distinguishes man from the other forms of life; it is not rationality as we have been made to believe.

Prior to exploring Arendt's conception of freedom and its implications for modern day politics, the chapter briefly examines the prevalent conception of freedom, which has permeated almost all areas of contemporary human life including politics – the liberal conception of freedom. Liberal freedom is most accurately defined by a theory of constraint in terms of the options or alternatives open to a person in a particular situation. Freedom is, therefore, the lack of constraint or interference in an individual's options or choices. Liberal freedom assumes a private space where no such interference is allowed. The individual is sovereign in this space. Notable thinkers who have significantly influenced the tradition of liberal freedom include: Thomas Hobbes (1588–1675), John Locke (1632–1704), Jean

Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), and Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997).

Liberal freedom goes further to equate liberty (freedom) to equality. In particular, Ronald Dworkin (in Flikschuh 2007, p. 115) argues that 'liberty is an aspect of equality, rather than, as it is often thought to be, an independent political ideal in conflict with it'. We will therefore examine this equation in the light of Alexis de Tocqueville's thought that freedom is not equal to equality and democracy is not equal to liberty. This analysis makes Arendt's critique of liberalism's 'equalising freedom' and its dubious notion of individuality intelligible. There is a marked difference between liberty and freedom in Arendt's understanding of freedom. Just like de Tocqueville, Arendt argues that liberty is but the foundation of freedom. This review paves the way for an in-depth analysis of Arendt's concept of political freedom as action in the public political sphere. Arendt's address of the problem of beginning, the *initium* (or principle) of freedom, sets the tone for political action and its central features – speech and plurality. This takes us to the phenomenology of the sphere of appearance and the existential significance of political action. Bearing in mind that the totalitarian elements of the past century have not only escorted us to this new millennium but are also potentially volatile in the political sphere, there is need to briefly discuss how we can safeguard political freedom in our age.

Liberal Freedom

The problem of political freedom has been the subject of much philosophical investigation for the past two millennia. Without a doubt, the political upheavals of the twentieth century have cast suspicion on the traditional conception of freedom, and yet political freedom is at the centre of much of public life. How are we moderns to know what political freedom is? Conservative and liberal views of freedom inform most of our thinking about freedom. On the one hand, conservatives argue that a free society would instil traditional religious, moral, and social values in each individual; that people may be free not only within a political society but may also be politically free even if their access to voting and office holding is limited by various substantive conditions (Brenkert 1991, p. 1). On the other hand, liberals contend that a free society would maintain certain minimal standards of non-interference, while letting individuals do what they choose; that the only way for individuals to control a government's power and protect their private affairs from unwarranted political intrusion is

by participation in the political process (Brenkert 1991, p. 1). Both conservatives and liberals hold that a person's material resources are irrelevant to whether or not he or she is free.[20]

Brenkert (1991, p. 65) demonstrates that the heart and life-blood of liberal freedom is the view that people are free only when they are not subject to constraint by others. As John Locke declares, liberty means to be free from restraint and violence from others. Liberalism's disdain of constraints or impediments renders its version of freedom as negative freedom, as opposed to positive freedom which uses the constraints to attain freedom. 'The strengths of liberal freedom lie in its concern for the protection of the individual from the forces of government and society. This has involved identifying a social sphere of life separate from the political, opposing the constraining forces which other people and institutions may impose on individuals, and characterising a private realm of freedom in which political power and coercion may not be legitimately used against individuals' (Brenkert 1991, p. 66).

At face value, liberalism promises to be a workable theory of freedom, but closer scrutiny reveals important weaknesses. Brenkert (1991) suggests four of them. First, in seeking to identify the forces that constrain individuals, liberal freedom has painted a picture of society in which other people, as well as our social and political institutions, are constant sources of threat. Second, it has fostered the separation and isolation of individuals rather than their union. Third, by defining the realm of freedom as a realm of privacy, it has fostered a minimalist view of the individual self. Fourth, by portraying political freedom as a neutral, non-political condition in which people are, in essence, free from politics, liberal freedom has left the determination of the political realm open to forms of government which need not acknowledge the political nature of humans. In our view, this is the worst for the reason that it was this same mentality that inspired Nazi totalitarianism. The Nazi did not acknowledge the human status and the political nature of the masses they were persecuting and later killing. We see the same phenomenon, although somehow discreet, in the African political public sphere. Political evil is becoming rampant in Africa in recent years because most rulers do not really understand the nature of politics, let alone the nature of freedom. The human status of man and his key role in the body politic is undermined in favour of ideologies that cement

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[20] We saw in Chapter Four how material resources actually determine one's freedom and participation in politics. For Arendt, if one engages in providing for oneself and one's family the means of use and consumption, one is not free for public activity. Public life is possible only after the much more urgent needs of life have been taken care of.

their love for power and glory. In Chapter Two above we saw how political evil arises when the human status of man is undermined by the powers that be. The abovementioned weaknesses strongly suggest liberalism's tendency towards a form of individualism which militates against all efforts at human solidarity and self-realisation. It is an individualism which promises freedom, while at the same time it alienates one from freedom. Nevertheless, true freedom, as we will see later on, liberates one from self, or rather from individualism. Again, we discovered in Chapter Two above that 'the greatest achievement of the Nazi Secret police, the SS, was the corruption of all human solidarity. The concentration camp inmates lived in complete solitude, which explains why they were each subdued easily.'[21] These shortfalls of liberal freedom demonstrate that modern democracies, with liberalism as their central ideology, are to a large extent a diplomatic form of totalitarianism. The very elements that characterised totalitarian regimes are embodied in modern democracies. Unfortunately their detailed analysis is beyond our present focus.

Liberal freedom seeks to escape from politics as much as it seeks political freedom. John Stuart Mill defines the sphere of personal, private life where society may not legitimately interfere as 'the appropriate region of human liberty. The individual is sovereign in this sphere (Brenkert 1991, p. 89). What drives liberal freedom is the demarcation of a private realm in which man can enjoy complete and absolute freedom. Yet this attitude deepens the world alienation that has led to an apathy towards politics and the political. When men shun politics, the political realm is prone to abuse by totalitarians; eventually men suffer political evil even in the privacy of their homes. Brenkert (1991) exposes a fundamental tension or contradiction at the heart of liberal freedom: the very view that seeks to protect individuals invokes other views which undercut and threaten them. He characterises this as 'the crisis of liberalism'.

Deutsch & Soffer (1987, p. 1) demonstrates that other critics have defined the crisis of liberalism as the crisis of moral foundations. Liberals tend to define constraints and freedom independently of morality. At its most fundamental level, liberal democracy is morally neutral concerning choices of ways of life. For Ronald Dworkin, the liberal state must be neutral on the question of the good life; political decisions must be, so far as it is possible, independent of any particular conception of the good life, or of what gives value to life

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[21] Cf. Chapter Two 'Human Rights and Political Evil in Modernity'

(Deutsch & Soffer 1987, p. 1). Divorcing morality from politics is a problem not only for liberal theorists; according to George Kateb, Arendt also shares this problem. But as we will discover later on, it is more a misunderstanding of her political theory than anything else that warrants such a criticism. In the modern political sphere, the need for morality cannot be overemphasised. Modern democratic governments have become morally neutral on the very issues that matter most to people. In our view, political morality is an area that deserves philosophical inquiry for the reason that it could arrest most of the political evils that mar our political realms.

How do liberals define constraints, and when is it justifiable to impose constraints on others? Constraints would be those things which force a person to do something other than what he or she desires, but will not include those preventions or impediments which accord with the law of nature (Brenkert 1991, p. 67). These constraints are obstacles only to possible choices and not to actions and wants. The objects of choice need not be provided but they should not be constrained. There are moments when the state, for instance, may impose constraints on the freedom of citizens for the sake of the preservation of national sovereignty. The state may, in extreme cases, use armed force and kill civilians in the name of safeguarding national sovereignty.[22] It is acceptable for liberals to bring into play such values as national sovereignty, justice, and security to justify the deployment of such constraints as armed force. We cannot but wonder who ought to determine whether or not to impose and lift constraints; how people can determine whether the use of force was really for the safeguard of the value in question, and not for other ulterior motives. Which is more important and pertinent in times of political crises: the individual or the state? It was such disregard for utilitarian motives and a focus instead on the so-called good of the state that stimulated totalitarians like Hitler to

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[22] The ongoing civil unrest in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Ivory Coast are cases in point. Several other African states often use force in similar circumstances to safeguard national sovereignty. Zimbabwe, for instance, used force and violence to drive out the white farmers in 2008. Intimidation has been used in some countries to silence government critics. For instance, on 12 February 2011, the Inspector General of the Malawi Police Forces summoned and interrogated a political science lecturer from the University of Malawi's Chancellor College about an example he gave in a Public Policy class, in which he drew parallels between the growing political crisis in Malawi and that which led to popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The President accused lecturers of plotting to topple his government through academic anarchy. Chancellor College remains closed and the lecturers are still fighting for academic freedom till today. Since yesterday, 20 July 2011 there is an unprecedented nationwide unrest with protests against the handling of the economy and growing autocratic tendencies by the incumbent president Bingu wa Muntharika. At least nine people have died in clashes between demonstrators and the Malawi Police. Malawi, like most African states, continues to trample on civil liberties and freedoms in the name of defending national sovereignty.

commit gross political evils. From the perspective of liberal theorists and their justification of constraints we may argue that it was right to persecute and kill six million Jews and other minorities for the sake of the purification of the German race.[23] We all know that no explanation will ever justify the Holocaust. It is therefore our concern that political leaders may not always be the best judges of whether or not to impose constraints on the citizenry. Such are the political issues that call for morality in the public political sphere.

The liberal idea of freedom as non-interference is often associated with Thomas Hobbes (Flikschuh 2007, p. 18). According to Hobbes, many things other than persons can be free. However, he is quick to point out that mere non-interference is not a sufficient condition of freedom. External interference can render unfree only things that were previously in a state of self-induced movement (Flikschuh 2007, p. 18). Similarly, Berlin (1969 quoted in Flikschuh 2007, p. 19) argues that 'I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity.' Political liberty in this sense is simply the area in which a man can act unobstructed by others. To be free is not to be interfered with by others. For Berlin, non-interference is the necessary and sufficient condition of freedom. Force of circumstance may prevent a person from carrying out their intended activity, but such interpersonal preventions do not render a person unfree to do what they want or intend to do (Flikschuh 2007, p. 20). They are only rendered unable to do so. The essence of interference with freedom lies in its coercive character. One person's deliberate and successful frustration of another's pursuit of their intentions renders the latter unfree. One is unfree only when one's intentions have been coercively interfered with and altered. For Berlin, coercion need not include the use of physical force. The use of coercion, unlike physical force, is designed to have the effect of getting a person to change their intentions.[24] It works on a person's capacity to form and to change their intentions. It is directed at a person's will rather than their body. In this regard, only persons are capable of freedom because only persons are capable of forming and acting on intentions that are susceptible to freedom violations. Berlin locates a person's capacity for freedom in a distinctive capacity of the will as the capacity to form and effect action on intentions (Flikschuh 2007, p. 21). Negative freedom for Berlin is

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[23] Cf. Chapter Two 'Human Rights and Political Evil in Modernity.'

[24] In the contemporary political sphere, however, we have seen the use of physical force as a means to getting people to make a confession when questioned by the police; or getting people to change their intentions, as in the case of protests, demonstrations, or even revolutions. See note 23 above.

therefore a capacity of the will, and freedom prevention is the interference by others with a person's will.

Liberal thinking about freedom is not primarily political; it does not require any particular society or political system (Brenkert 1991, p. 81). There are those liberals who invoke rights to define freedom. The idea of human rights emerged out of the political history of the West, and in particular, out of the liberal political theory. For liberals, human rights safeguard the freedom or liberty of a people.[25] In his *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill uncompromisingly defends individual freedom of thought and speech as among the most fundamental rights. His argument derives from his ideal of individual self-development. Being left free from interference by government and the moral majority to say what one thinks enhances a person's capacity to judge for themselves (Flikschuh 2007, p. 115). According to Mill, negative liberty is of importance insofar as it encourages individuals to become independent in thought and action. Becoming independent – achieving individuality – is the *telos*, or end, of man as a progressive being.[26] Close to Mill's thesis of individual self-development is Ronald Dworkin's moral ideal of individual independence. It is on this ideal that he premises his conception of liberal equality. Dworkin conceives of negative liberty not as an independent value but as 'an aspect' of a certain conception of substantive equality (Flikschuh 2007, p. 115). For him, liberal equality does not treat individuals in exactly the same way, but shows respect and concern for a person's individuality, emphasising not uniformity of treatment but uniqueness of person. However, Dworkin's assertion does not correspond to reality. Modern democracies, with liberal freedom as their central ideology, put a premium upon equality and sameness rather than upon difference or 'individuality', and soon they become intolerant of the very freedom to be different (de Tocqueville 1840, p. 20). Men in democracies are prone to subordinate their concern for 'freedom' of the individual to the respect, or fear of, the majority. They lose respect for their own freedom and individuality and in turn become grossly indifferent to the free expression of individual thought. Democracy and equality are great levellers; men are prone to be 'lost in the crowd' of their fellows. Modern democracies accentuate sameness, undermine individualism and create to

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[25] Cf. Chapter Two for a detailed analysis of the origin, justification, and the practice of human rights.

[26] Because of Mill's ideal of individual development and because of his distinction between higher and lower pleasures (though not between a higher and lower self), others such as Berlin have cast him as a theorist of positive freedom.

perfection what contemporary sociologists bemoan as pre-eminently an 'age of conformity' (de Tocqueville 1840, p. 21). Whereas the nations of our time cannot prevent the condition of man from becoming equal, it depends upon 'men' themselves whether the principle of equality is to lead them to servitude or freedom. Yet if conformity seems destined to be the natural lot of men in democracies, de Tocqueville would make individuality, independence, and personal freedom the product of art. In other words, de Tocqueville is trying to underscore that claim that conformity or submission to the majority is not fate; man's destiny awaits his own creation. By implication we would argue that man's freedom awaits his own creation just as an artist can create a product of art! Freedom is a product of one's own creation. An individual ought to take it upon himself to create and maintain his freedom. In the same way, Arendt, as we will see later on, draws a lot on the creative and performing arts to put across her idea of freedom as acting before an audience.

Liberal freedom can be valued instrumentally, for what people can do with it, or intrinsically for its own sake (Brenkert 1991, p. 69). Complementary to this thought is Rousseau's contention that man can be politically forced to be free. Rousseau alleges that man is born free yet everywhere he finds himself in chains. Man finds himself in chains because, distracted by superficially more attractive pursuits – such as the pursuit of the satisfaction of desire – man has traded away his freedom to others who now dominate his will (Flikschuh 2007, p. 25). Man mistakes desire satisfaction – getting what he thinks he wants to have – for freedom. Yet true freedom, for Rousseau, is self- government understood as the will's non-domination by 'alien' forces or persons (Flikschuh 2007, p. 25). We see in Rousseau that freedom as self-determination (positive freedom) coincides with freedom as non-domination by others (negative freedom), so much so that the end of participation in government is the achievement of individual emancipation, which is possible only through social engagement with others. For Rousseau, self-realisation takes place through shared political participation. Here, Rousseau highlights an important point as far as Arendt's concept of freedom is concerned: political participation. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between them which makes Arendt a bitter critic of Rousseau, particularly his idea than man is born free, his location of freedom in the will, his idea of sovereignty, and also his exploration of the sphere of the intimate over and above the public sphere.

Arendt on Political Freedom

Hannah Arendt develops her concept of political freedom in an exceptional sense. She defines the concept of political freedom mainly by contrasting it to several other notions of freedom – above all, to that of free will, which has played a dominant role in the Christian tradition. The notion of free will has traditionally dominated the understanding of politics, but it has done so by misinterpreting freedom as independence and sovereignty (Rosenmuller 2007, p. 1). Since St Augustine of Hippo's time, freedom has been largely understood as an attribute of the will. Arendt draws a distinction between the understanding of freedom articulated by the philosophical tradition and that which found expression in the political experience of Greek and Roman antiquity. The philosophical tradition understood freedom as an attribute of the will (*liberum arbitrium*), while in the Greek and Roman republican experience it was seen as a property of action, of appearing in public and deliberating among a community of peers.

Freedom is experienced in the process of acting and nothing else. The capacity to act and move must be understood as the capacity to begin. The Greek word *archein*, which covers beginning, leading, ruling – the outstanding qualities of the free man – bears witness to an experience in which being free and the capacity to begin something new coincide (Arendt 2006a). By freedom Arendt means the capacity to begin, to start something new, to do the unexpected, with which all human beings are endowed by virtue of being born. The category of action is the one most closely related to the principle of natality. By acting, individuals re-enact the miracle of beginning inherent in their birth. The beginning that each of us represents by virtue of being born is actualised every time we act; that is, every time we begin something new. The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity for beginning something new, that is, of acting (Arendt 1958, p. 9). Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative; that is, they are prompted to action. Following St Augustine, Arendt describes birth as the entry into life of a singular, unrepeatable and hence unique individual (Gottsegen 1994, p. 24). The birth of every individual is thus the promise of a new beginning. To act, therefore, is to be able to disclose the self and to do the unanticipated. In his political philosophy, St Augustine assumed that: 'that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody.' With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the

world itself, which, of course, is the only way of saying that the *principle* of freedom was created when man was created but not before (d'Entreves 1994, p. 6). Arendt (2006a, p. 165) demonstrates that we find in Augustine's thinking not only the discussion of freedom as *liberum arbitrium*, which became very decisive for the tradition of political philosophy, but also an entirely differently conceived notion of freedom which characteristically appears in his only political treatise, *De Civitate Dei* (The City of God). In this treatise, freedom is conceived not as an inner human disposition but as a character of human existence in the world. Man does not possess freedom so much as he is equated with the appearance of freedom in the universe. Man is free because he is a beginning and was so created after the universe had already come into existence. In the birth of each man this initial beginning is reaffirmed, because in each instance something new comes into an already existing world which will continue to exist after each individual's death. Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same. God created man in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom (Arendt 2006a, p. 166).

Since action is rooted in natality and it is the actualisation of freedom, it carries with it the capacity to perform miracles, that is, to introduce what is totally unexpected (d'Entreves 1994, p. 67). By the *initium* man is an acting being, hence it is not in the least superstitious to look for the unforeseeable and unpredictable, to be prepared for and to expect miracles in the political realm (Arendt 2006a, p. 169). To act means, therefore, to be able to take the initiative and to do the unanticipated, to exercise that capacity for freedom which was given to us the moment we came into the world. To act and to be free are, in this respect, synonymous: to be free means to engage in action, while through action our capacity for freedom is actualised (d'Entreves 1994, p. 67). Action is itself a medium which facilitates the actualisation of human plurality and uniqueness. Action is continuous and spontaneous and often unpredictable, such that we cannot know beforehand how a newborn's life, for instance, will unfold, and what actions and interactions it will generate. Each actor in his spontaneity and uniqueness is capable of doing the unexpected. In doing so he begins a series of actions and reactions all along the web of relationships with consequences such as none can predict. Action is not fully under the control of the actor. It has a tragic dimension in that one cannot tell in advance how it will unfold; very often the initiator suffers or gets rewarded. Gottsegen (1994, p. 25) argues that action, and more particularly political action, is held by Arendt to constitute the *sine qua non* through which the actualisation of inborn potential is to occur.

Men can react and act in novel fashion because they are free; and since the outcome of action is always interaction, it is forever in doubt.

The problem of beginning so fascinated Arendt that she ventured on an analysis of the relevance of the problem of beginning to the phenomenon of revolution. Such a beginning of course is intimately connected with violence. With the French Revolution (1789) at the back of her mind, Arendt agrees with Condorcet (1793) that the word 'revolutionary' can be applied only to revolutions whose aim is freedom (Arendt 2006c, p. 11). The French Revolution was a revolution of liberty since it affirmed the freedom of conscience and allowed the Protestants and the Jews to live within the community (Soboul 1974, p. 11). Liberty is, for Arendt, only a condition of freedom: nobody would ever be able to arrive at a place where freedom rules if he could not move without restraint.[27] Liberty means therefore to be free from oppression. Revolutions tend to break with the status quo, revealing instead a novel form of power inherent in human plurality. Only where novelty is present and where novelty is connected with the idea of freedom are we entitled to speak of revolution. It is important, however, to bear in mind that Arendt is not a Marxian and does not believe that freedom is the necessary result of revolution; but neither does she deny that freedom can be, and often has been, experienced in revolutionary action (Arendt 2006a, p. x). Arendt claims that 'revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning,' since they represent the attempt to found a new political space, a space where freedom can appear as a worldly reality (d'Entreves 1994, p. 68). The French *philosophes* articulated an understanding of freedom with a new, hitherto almost unknown emphasis on public freedom. Their public freedom was not an inner realm into which men might escape at will from the pressures of the world, nor was it the *liberum arbitrium* which makes the will choose between alternatives. Freedom for them could exist only in public; it was a tangible, worldly reality, something created by men to be enjoyed by men rather than a gift or a capacity, it was the man-made public space which antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and becomes visible to all (d'Entreves 1994, p. 70). In this case, as in other revolutions, individual men and women had the courage to interrupt their routine activities, to step forward from their private lives in order to create a public space where

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[27] This does not imply that Arendt subscribes to a negative liberty theory of freedom. Freedom for her is not essentially the absence of restraint or interference. The absence of interference is, as it were, a conducive environment for political action to flourish.

freedom could appear, and to act in such a way that the memory of their deeds could become a source of inspiration for future generations.[28] In doing so they rediscovered the truth known to the ancient Greeks that action is the supreme blessing of human life, that which bestows significance on the lives of individuals (d'Entreves 1994, p. 68).

Arendt explains her notion of freedom that is inherent in political acting by recalling Machiavelli's concept of *virtù*, which in her words is: 'the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of fortune'. Virtue is a kind of 'virtuosity', an excellence; it needs an audience as 'a space where freedom can appear' and it needs 'courage'. Courage is political insofar that one is not occupied with matters of individual survival and providing for oneself but has to confront considerations of public interest. 'Courage is indispensable because, in politics, not life but the world is at stake. This calls for the courage to disengage from the cares of daily survival and perhaps even to risk life itself. It also takes courage to confront the public's judgement of our deeds and speeches' (Rosenmuller 2007, p. 6).

What makes action so important is that the essential uniqueness of each person is opposed by forces which are quite capable of stymieing its manifestation, forces which Arendt characterises as the biological and social aspects of human sameness (Gottsegen 1994, p. 25). As it were, Arendt's theory of action is founded on the givenness of human plurality. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt stresses that action is primarily symbolic in character and that the web of human relationships is sustained by communicative interaction. A community is only meaningful when it uses language to articulate the meaning and to coordinate the actions of a plurality of agents. By implication, the theory of action entails interaction and the mutual revelation of mutual becoming (Gottsegen 1994, p. 27). It is only in a community that men can achieve the manifestation of who they are. Nevertheless, not every gathering of persons is such a community as might facilitate the process of co-manifestation. Modern society, for instance, is not such a community, not on account of its size, but because of the behavioural conformity and uniformity which hold sway within it. It also fails because within it almost all interactions are private in the sense of being one-on-one exchanges. In modern

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[28] Arendt's favourite example is the American Revolution, where the act of foundation took the form of a constitution of liberty.

society one never appears before the whole community; rather one appears serially before one person – and hence in one relational role – at a time (Gottsegen 1994, p. 27).

The political community is the one that enables those who belong to it to manifest their individuality through their interactions with one another (Gottsegen 1994, p. 27). To be able to manifest one's individuality is freedom. Unfortunately it has been the fate of pluralism in Western thought to take a rather poor second place to philosophies that make their point of departure the premise of underlying unity and symmetry, needing only to be uncovered by pure reason, to be deemed the real, true, and the lasting (Nisbet 1974, p. 387). Nevertheless, Nisbet (1974) argues that there have been some momentous exceptions to this sort of Western monism, which even permeates politics. Arendt's treatment of plurality as a precondition for action is one such exception. Arendt establishes the connection between action and plurality by means of an anthropological argument. In her view, plurality is the condition that corresponds to action. She defines it as 'the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world' (d'Entreves 2008, p. 11). Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live (Arendt 1958, p. 7-9). Thus, plurality refers both to equality and distinction, to the fact that all human beings belong to the same species and are sufficiently alike to understand one another, but yet no two of them are ever interchangeable, since each of them is an individual endowed with a unique biography and perspective on the world.[29]

It is by virtue of plurality that each of us is capable of acting and relating to others in ways that are unique and distinctive. In so doing we contribute to a network of actions and relationships that is infinitely complex and unpredictable (d'Entreves 2008, p. 11). This network of actions is what makes up the public space, where individuals relate by means of language or speech. Speech alongside plurality is therefore the necessary condition for action. Speech enables individuals to articulate the meaning of their actions and to coordinate the actions of a plurality of other agents. On the other hand, speech entails action not only in the sense that speech itself is a form of action, but that action is often the means whereby we check the sincerity of the speaker. Just as action without speech runs the risk of being meaningless and would be impossible to coordinate with the actions of the others, so speech

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[29] This uniqueness of each individual calls to mind Leibniz' theory of the *identity of indiscernibles*; that is, no two beings, not even of the same species, are identical.

without action would lack one of the means by which we may confirm the veracity of the speaker (d'Entreves 2008, p. 11).

It is indeed through action and speech that individuals reveal themselves as the unique individuals they are; they disclose to the world their distinct personalities. Arendt emphasises that action and speech reveal 'who' an individual is as distinct to 'what' she is.[30] The human activities of neither labour nor work enable individuals to disclose their identities. In labour the individuality of each person is submerged by being bound to a chain of natural necessities imposed by biological survival. In work there is no scope for individuality in that each work of art or production bears the mark of its maker; but the maker is still subordinate to the end product in the sense that the product will generally outlast the maker. The end product does not tell us who the creator was; only that she had certain abilities and talents. So it is only through action and speech and interacting with others in words and deeds that individuals reveal who they personally are and can affirm their unique identities. Without the accompaniment of speech, action would lose its revelatory quality and could no longer be identified with an agent (d'Entreves 2008, p. 12). It would lack, as it were, the conditions of ascription of agency.

The importance of action as revelation needs no further validation. Kateb (1977, p. 158) confirms that to press beyond the revelatory qualities of action is, for Arendt, absurd because it is to demand an answer to the question, 'Why be human?' Action is the privileged vehicle of authentic self-disclosure, rooted in natality, and not mortality as others have argued.[31] Mortality impels men to achieve a preternatural lastingness; but it is the fact of their specific and unique natality that enables men to act in a way that stamps the individual's actions as unmistakably his own and unlike anybody else's (Gottsegen 1994, p. 26). While a confrontation with the likelihood of one's own death may cause one to become aware of one's unique destiny, the differentiation of self from self is fundamental and marks every unique *telos* which may or may not be achieved in the course of one's lifetime.[32]

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[30] What one *is* refers to her abilities and talents, deficiencies and shortcomings, which all human beings share.

[31] In contrast, Heidegger argues that authenticity is essentially and existentially rooted in the fact of mortality.

[32] This is not to say that action as such is teleological. As pointed out earlier, action's trajectory is unknown, yet we know that every life unfolds towards some unknown *telos*.

From an epistemological point of view, action and speech create a communal space where an individual appears to others as others appear to her. Acting cannot be done in isolation from others. It requires the presence of a plurality of actors who from their different perspectives can judge the quality of what is being enacted. As alluded to earlier, action needs plurality in the same way that performing artists need an audience. That space 'where I appear to others as they appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly' is what Arendt (1958, p. 198-199) refers to as the 'space or *the sphere of appearance*.' Such public space can be always recreated anew wherever individuals gather together politically, that is, wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action. Since it is a creation of action, the space of appearance is highly fragile and exists only when actualised through the performance of deeds or the utterance of words. 'Unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men – as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed – but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever' (Arendt 1958, p. 199). The space of appearance is a potential space that finds its actualisation in the actions and speeches of individuals who have come together to undertake a common project. It may arise suddenly, as in the case of revolutions, or it may develop slowly through the efforts to change some specific piece of legislation or policy, (d'Entreves 1994, p. 77) for example, protecting groups from discrimination and oppression, fighting for academic freedom in institutions of higher learning, demonstrations and sit-ins for justice and equal rights.

Gottsegen (1994, p. 50) demonstrates that whatever enters this public space achieves a heightened measure of reality through the attention it receives from all who are gathered there. That public attention can make something real is based on the supposition that only what appears and is spoken about is fully real. Nevertheless, the reality that the public realm bestows is not based on the mere fact of appearance, but on the fact that what receives this reality appears simultaneously to, and is spoken about by many persons each of whom occupies a different perspective – a differential of position and perspective that essentially correlates with human plurality. Only by virtue of what is shared in this common realm of the public can we be said to share a world in common with one another at all (Gottsegen 1994, p. 51). Arendt calls such sharing truly political. That men share a species likeness to one

another may be the ultimate precondition of all community but it is not a condition of political community. It is only because men are at the same time unlike one another that they must constitute political communities, for only a political community is inherently cognisant of the individuality of each of its members. When Arendt talks about public action, therefore, she is referring to any object that would be of concern to all who stand within the public space. It appears, though, that more than this alone is required because not every issue that is of common concern will engender the manifestation of human difference that Arendt insists public action demands (Gottsegen 1994, p. 54). In other words, not everything that enters the public realm will cause individual action or be an occasion enough for individuals to actualise their freedom. For instance, modernity has sacrificed all the values characteristic of *the common world* of action and speech – freedom, plurality, and solidarity – in favour of the values of life, productivity, and abundance.

For Arendt, the *raison d'etre* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action (d'Entreves 1994, footnote 8, p. 177). The reason for which people ought to organise a common political life, and the reason for which they have organised it when they have been a truly political people, is to have the daily actuality of freedom (Kateb 1977, p. 147). Freedom becomes a direct aim only when a people makes a revolution and thus deliberately creates the frame for the daily actuality of freedom (Kateb 1977, p. 147). The organisation or form for freedom, for the action which expresses or manifests or embodies freedom, is the *polis* or public realm: it is the world, in the sense of a worldly place. Only when there is such a place and men use it to be free can we say that men rival nature: they 'can establish a reality of their own' (Kateb 1977, p. 147). The new methods which scientists have developed for 'acting into nature' may equal political action in the quality of rivalling nature's creativity. Such works, however, lack the ability to illuminate human existence, the 'existentially most important aspect' of action. There are many deeds and acts to which we give the name 'political', but not all of them – not many of them – show forth freedom in Arendt's sense of that term. Arendt grants in passing that freedom is not confined to the political realm, we can find traces and signs in almost all man's activities; but freedom develops fully only when it is not hidden but appears in political action in a worldly space. Kateb (1977, p. 148) submits that the only vehicle of freedom, therefore, is political action when rightly done.

The existential achievement of action is that it illuminates human existence. The identity of a person is revealed in political action. 'For this knowing and being known to be possible, there must be a worldly place, sustained by a common commitment to worldliness, in which men are expected to act – and do act, by word and deed ... There alone is light. All other places are dark, and in them the person remains obscure. In his non-political life, he is reduced to his biological species-being ...' (Kateb 1977, p. 148-149). The political self, publicly presented, is the real self – or what must pass for the real self. For Arendt, the real self is the worldly self, not the self of introspection, the inward-looking self. When rightly done, political action permits the actor to escape the self – to be free of self (Kateb 1977, p. 152).

Having established that freedom is not inherent in human beings, Arendt seemingly stands as an anti-liberal thinker. Following Jean-Jacques Rousseau, liberal institutions and human rights advocacy in particular are premised on the principle that freedom is a natural right for every human being. To renounce one's freedom is therefore to renounce one's humanity and rights. Regardless of the authority of this idea worldwide, we agree with Arendt that a human being is born with a capacity for freedom, the actualisation of which is incumbent on the agent, not in isolation but in a plurality of other human beings. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to completely brand Arendt as an anti-liberal thinker, when she defended most of the liberal principles such as the right to life, freedom of expression and opinion, etc. We submit, however, that Arendt's assumptions for advocating these fundamental human rights are quite different from the liberal assumptions on which the same are based. The major difference is in the question whether or not freedom is inherent in human beings, and whether or not plurality is essential for freedom.

Liberal freedom teaches that human beings are equal and must be treated equally without discrimination in terms of gender, race, religion, sex, etc. Whereas Arendt defends equality she rather emphasises political equality, or *isonomy*, which ensures that the political community is truly a community of action.[33] This equality does not protect a human being against discrimination but it protects the human capacity for action. With this type of equality all men can equally engage in action; but when there is a rule, true political community dies because automatically we cannot be equal with a ruler. True action partakes of mutuality and it is premised upon a potential equality of spontaneity, which the division between rulers and

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[33] Political equality is a democratic value in that it presents human beings as equals in a political society. Yet modern democracies do not succeed in ensuring efficient representation.

ruled precludes (Gottsegen 1994, p. 57). Though political equality does not equalise absolutely it can bring into existence equality enough to facilitate common action. If only action redeems, and if action is only possible among political equals, then political equality ought to prevail. Rule, to whatever degree it exists, diminishes action's prospects commensurably.

Equality and distinction are in the very nature of human plurality. If political actors were not equal they could not understand each other and work together. If they were not distinct from each other, they would not need words or deeds to make themselves understood; they would not have the inestimable opportunity for communicating themselves rather than merely messages. Political equality is not that equality of condition, but a condition that makes men equal. Only in public, and where the business is the common thing, and the talents needed are potentially in all men, can there be equality on earth. In all other spheres of life the differences between people engender inequalities.

Arendt's critique of sovereignty also helps to underline the necessity of the plurality for action. Contrary to Thomas Hobbes, Arendt asserts that man is free but he is not sovereign. If he were granted sovereignty, plurality would be ruined; that is, one man's sovereignty would violate the plurality of the rest. Man's lack of sovereignty and the consequent fact that he is an actor among actors, renders action heroic. Arendt's rejection of sovereignty to human beings validates her disdain for dictatorship and her consequent support for participatory democracy. Arendt also rejects representation as a form of freedom, or political action. She nevertheless prefers modern representative governments because of the absence of oppression and injustice, the presence of personal security and liberty. In a healthy representative government, the people rule their representatives but they do not act and hence they are not free. They are not free because they do not participate. Arendt argues that actions and opinions, the very being of freedom, cannot be represented; only interest and welfare can (Kateb 1977, p. 159). Participation is somehow connected to consent and the will. Arendt fiercely rejects Rousseau for the centrality he gave to the concept of will in political theory, and the way he tied human dignity to living by one's own will. Wills cannot be mediated, compromised, without injury to their dignity. Opinions, on the other hand can be mediated; minds can instruct and affect each other. There is only one mode of political action, only one

form of freedom in the world: the direct participation of diverse equals in the conversation pertaining to public business.

For Arendt, there is only one true mode of political action, and that is speech, in the form of either talking or, occasionally, writing, as with the Declaration of Independence and other manifestoes or addresses to the world, writing that should be read aloud (Kateb 1977, p. 155). While Arendt's writing is concerned continuously with praises for war and revolution, she does not praise violence, whether necessary or justifiable.[34] Once violence is excluded as non political, and such physical activities as labour and craft, only speech is political action *par excellence*. If action is speech, it is clear that a political actor cannot be represented in political action. Words you do not speak are not your words, but those of somebody else. Political action therefore is direct participation in the conversation of diverse equals. The modes of speech include speechmaking and decision-taking, the oratory and the business, the thinking and the persuading, predicative and argumentative speech, the process of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, the discussions, the deliberations, and the making of decisions. The subject matter of such speech, or rather, the content of political action is talk about public matters, the public thing; it is talk about what to do (rather than the actual doing or executing or administering of it). This is not to suggest that political action is idle, academic, or gratuitous. It grows out of the need to respond to events. The result of talk is often to start something new, to begin a process, as we have already established. Arendt cuts out of political action most of the stuff of modern political discussion, and stamps it as invasion by modern society of politics. Economic matters, because of their connection to the processes of life which should be private, are ruled out of politics. Concern with life has no place in politics.

Kateb (1977, p. 158) demonstrates that all relations, whether made manifest in speech or physical actions, and which we usually call political, are not genuinely political if they are relations of inequality. Either these relations lack speech or the speech they contain is indirect or devoid of mutuality and give and take. The relations where speech is lacking include violence and force. The relations where speech is indirect include voting and being represented. The relations where speech is devoid of mutuality include ruling, commanding,

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[34] Cf. Chapter Two, 'Human Rights and Political Evil in Modernity'

administering, and coercing. Those who use violence or force do not talk and hence do not reveal themselves; neither are their victims revealed.

Arendt's understanding of freedom is inseparable from power, which she defines as the ability to begin – the ability to act in a public space, to move in a space of freedom with others. For Arendt (2006c, p. 175), power is plural; for it to exist there must be other centres of power. Birmingham (2006, p. 54) demonstrates that power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another. Arendt rejects Rousseau's identification of sovereignty with power. For her, sovereignty can denote strength, but it can never denote power. Power therefore denotes not only the ability to act, but action in concert with others for a public political purpose (d'Entreves 1994, p. 77). The power structure itself precedes and outlasts all aims, so that power, far from being the means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in the means-ends category (Birmingham 2006, p. 151). When power has completely disappeared, there is occasion for full-blown terror caused by the presence of an absolute violence[35] without the presence of power (Birmingham 2006, p. 54).

Arendt on Political Morality

For action to be free it must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other. Motives and aims or goals are always present as 'determining factors', but 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 – although it needs both for the execution of any particular goal. Arendt is trying to purge the definition of right political action from inner determination, whether it be that of the assertive will, the calculating intelligence, the impassioned heart, or the urges of the body or spirit (Kateb 1977, p. 152). Action is from principle, not in the moral sense. It is an idea or value, general in nature and universal in validity; it comes to one from outside and inspires from without. It appears in life, however, only when a given political actor acts from it: the appearance of freedom, like the manifestation of principles, coincides with the performing act. Arendt gives

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[35] This is common when the state uses force to curtail protests and similar civil unrest. As we saw under 'Liberal Freedom' above, the state resorts to force to protect national security and sovereignty. However it achieves this essentially because the power structure is dispersed and deserted, for lack of courage to risk even life. See note 23 above.

examples such as honour, glory, love of quality, distinction, excellence. A political actor can act 'for the sake of honour', for instance, to do honourable deeds, but he does not pursue honour (Kateb 1977, p. 153). To act from principle means to spend one's political life, one's worldly career, dominated by the effort to live up to the objective requirements of a single loyalty, and to do so at whatever cost to one's interests. To live for a single loyalty is to lose the self and gain the world. To live outside oneself and for the sake of acting from a principle is to live freely, free of the necessities of body, heart, and mind. To live with others loyal to the same or to a different principle is to live in a free world. Living in this manner is to be human, at last.

Having established that action is not a means to some end but that it is an end in itself; that political action does not serve other purposes, what then is the place of political morality in the Arendtian political public sphere? In *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, Kateb (1984, p. 31) argues that if morality is one kind of immorality, then in a few moments of recklessness Arendt celebrates immorality. Arendt talks about particular acts in a way that seems to strengthen one's sense of alarm that her general theory of action can too easily accommodate great substantial evils, even totalitarianism. Nonetheless, we agree with d'Entreves (1994) that Kateb's charge of immoralism against Arendt's theory of action is misconceived. To start with, Arendt's writings reveal her great admiration for the Greek way of life, whose moral categories inform our own morality to the present day. In particular, and in connection with her theory of action, Arendt advocates virtue in place of goodness, respect in place of love, solidarity in place of compassion and pity. Moral absolutes – goodness, love, compassion, and pity – are anti-political in the sense that they belong to the private sphere of life and they would be denatured and ruined were they made public. Absolute morality is therefore bound to be distorted when allowed into the public realm. For instance, goodness has a tendency to hide from being seen and heard. The moment it becomes public, goodness loses its specific character of goodness, of being done for nothing but goodness' sake.[36] What is more, love is tied to the life of a particular individual and it has no future without them. d'Entreves (1994, p. 94) notes that if politics is viewed as an extension of the private morality, Kateb's critique stands. Nevertheless in her political theory Arendt did not disregard the moral dimension of political action. Well aware that the trajectory of action is unpredictable, Arendt relied on the human capacity to forgive, the power to make and keep

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[36] Cf. Chapter 'Two Human Rights and Political Evil in Modernity.'

promises, the ability to think, and the capacity to judge. These were, in her view, the moral resources available to political actors in their public capacity, the faculties through which they could set some limit to action (d'Entreves 1994, p. 94). For Arendt, therefore, the morality appropriate to politics must be grounded in public criteria and finds expression not in private sentiments, but in the exercise of the human capacities for promising, forgiving, judging, and thinking.

By way of conclusion, this chapter submits that African political thought leaves a lot to be desired as far as political freedom is concerned. As we saw in Chapter Three, the African political public sphere is still haunted by not only the political evils of the past, but also corruption, human rights abuses, statelessness, and oppression of the opposition. In recent months we are witnessing a new wave of political liberation, not from neocolonial masters, but from totalitarian democrats who have abused power and state resources for personal gain. Could this be *a new beginning* for Africa? This appears to be a new opportunity for Africa to transform the elements of totalitarianism and neocolonialism. Africans need to act 'together politically with peoples whose histories and traditions are not 'their' own, but with whom 'they' inhabit and share an ever-shrinking earth' (Kohn 2006, p. 114). Insofar as human beings are themselves beginnings, there is a possibility of a new beginning. Contrary to Rousseau who observed that a thinking man is a depraved animal, Arendt saw that the greatest threat to freedom today is thoughtlessness. It is precisely when citizens cease to think and thus renounce their responsibility for self-creation that the potential for evil in modern society arises. Thinking, which is the activity of freedom, is a typical political action, yet as Arendt observes, it is increasingly rare.[37]

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[37] Call for papers, Hannah Conference "Thinking in Dark Times: The Legacy of Hannah Arendt", Bard College, 2009, http://www.bard.edu/arendt/overview/ 8 march 2009

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