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# The Case of Human Plurality: Hannah Arendt's Critique of Individualism in Enlightenment and Romantic Thinking

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THE CASE OF HUMAN PLURALITY: HANNAH ARENDT'S  
CRITIQUE OF INDIVIDUALISM  
IN ENLIGHTENMENT AND ROMANTIC THINKING

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

The theme of this thesis is Hannah Arendt's critique and ultimate rejection of the ideas of individualism developed during the Enlightenment and the Romantic periods. She rejects the Enlightenment notion of the "abstract man," but equally rejects the notion of Romantic introspection that followed. Such a critique is important to Arendt because she makes human plurality the center for her entire system of thought. Using the French Revolution, Jewish history, and totalitarianism as her examples, Arendt explains the effects of such overtly individualistic thinking in both society and politics. The goal of this thesis is not a comprehensive look at the vast number of theories developed during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods. That is far beyond its intended scope. The goal, instead, is to show how Arendt used her critique of a select number of ideas to further define and clarify her own thoughts. In the end it will be shown that while Arendt ranged all over in her thinking (from history to politics to philosophy) she engaged these topics in a systematic way as to explore the affinities and contradictions to human plurality in whatever she studied. She is drawn to the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries precisely because she envisions it as a watershed moment in Western conceptions of individuality, one that stamped out all thought of human plurality. Arendt wants to rescue the notion of human plurality and elevate it to a primal position in Western thought.

## INTRODUCTION: INDIVIDUALISM, ENLIGHTENEMENT, AND ROMANTICISM

The subject of this thesis is Hannah Arendt's critique and ultimate rejection of the ideas of individualism developed during the Enlightenment and the Romantic periods. She rejects the rational individualism of the Enlightenment and its notion of an abstract human being, who for Arendt "seems to exist nowhere," except in thought; but she equally rejects the notion of an introspective self in romanticism, where reality is given meaning only through self-consciousness. For Arendt, these two concepts represent two sides of the same coin. By over-emphasizing the individual, rational on the one hand and subjective on the other, these ideas helped create an intellectual atmosphere that was, in Arendt's eyes, detrimental to the very foundation of politics. With the rise of the totalitarian powers, Arendt saw that politics had indeed been shaken to its core. She turned to the eighteenth/earlier nineteenth centuries precisely to understand the problems of her own time. Arendt, however, was not the only one looking back in history to understand the death and destruction that seemed to characterize the twentieth century. There was an overwhelming drive among academics to find the origins of modern thought, modern society, and modern politics. The response among scholars was anything but unanimous. Some blamed the Enlightenment for using reason to justify total domination while others condemned Romanticism for its seemingly irrational elevation of the self. Along similar lines, some scholars criticized the liberal tradition of the "left" while others rebuked the conservative "right." Representative of her eclectic style of thinking, Arendt drew from each of these criticisms, but did not feel the need to accept their arguments wholesale. Instead, she developed her own way of addressing the

problems of the twentieth century. It is Arendt's unique response to the troubles of her time that forms the content of this thesis.

At the center of modern political thought is the debate over the rights of individuals versus the authority of the state. Going all the way back to the Reformation, questions of individual freedom and political authority appear in virtually every major discussion on the nature of politics, society, and even man himself. Can the individual and the state coexist or are they naturally conflicted against one another? The answer to this questions depended on where and when in Europe it was being asked. According to Leonard Krieger, the concept of individual freedom, or "individual secular liberty," characterized political thought in Western Europe as early as the seventeenth century. The freedom of the individual depended on maintaining some kind of distance from political authority. In Germany, however, "individualized freedom," or *Freiheit*, had to contend with another notion of freedom already present: *Libertaet*, which referred to the rights of German princes within the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> After 1650, as German princes began to exercise more political control, they interpreted *Libertaet* as the freedom to rule without Imperial interference. The idea of *Libertaet*, along with centralized administration and growing bureaucracies, changed the German principalities into sovereign territorial states.<sup>2</sup> Yet, within these states the individual, and individual rights, still occupied an ambiguous role. Krieger argues

The German princes never ceased to feel themselves aristocrats as well as monarchs, not only personally because of their family origins and connections, not only socially because of their special dependence on the nobility worked by the peculiarities of the German economic and social structure, but even institutionally, because the social and constitutional

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition*. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972), 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20

structures were so integrally intertwined that the very development of the German princes toward absolute sovereignty in their own territory was at the same time a development of their aristocratic rights within the [Holy Roman] German Empire. It was this institutional connection between sovereign power and aristocratic liberties...that made this kind of *Libertaet* the representative expression of German political liberty in the old regime.<sup>3</sup>

From 1650-1750, as the more individualistic ideas of *Freiheit* spread into Germany from enlightened thinkers in Western Europe, they were transformed to fit the prevalent ideas of *Libertaet*, resulting in the notion of enlightened absolutism. German thinkers “adopted western assumptions which made individuals the primary units of society and individual rights the basis and the limitation of the state, but they interpreted these assumptions in a way compatible with the preservation of the peculiar German corporate rights and made the prince arbiter over all.”<sup>4</sup> Using natural law, German thinkers were able to combine inalienable rights and political obligation in the form of an absolutist state.<sup>5</sup> After 1750, political ideas in Western Europe continued to further reflect notions of “material individualism,” but in Germany “natural law absolutism” held sway in both theory and practice until the French Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

During the second half of the eighteenth century, as Berlin became a center for the *Aufklärung*, Frederick the Great helped make Prussia a shining example of enlightened absolutism. He firmly believed “the sovereign represents the state...he and his peoples form but one body.” He wanted a rational state based on enlightened principles, not traditional authority. As Krieger points out, however, Frederick’s rational absolutism reinforced the combination of aristocratic privilege and state authority already

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 13-14

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>5</sup> Krieger uses Samuel Pufendorf, Christian Thomasius, and Christian Wolff as his examples, all of whom ultimately justified absolutism on natural law principles. See Ibid. Pp. 50-71

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 71

present in the idea of *Libertaet*. Frederick believed in the popular origins of the state, granting its members natural rights, but he also argued that “particular rights and duties” were by their nature unequal because they were grounded in the social order, the “estate.” The sovereign, as an absolute ruler, had authority over both.<sup>7</sup>

In Berlin and other enlightened cities the question of enlightenment, so closely connected to the question of individual rights and political authority, was anything but resolved. Even so-called “enlightened” men had a hard time agreeing on a single definition. The question itself, “What is Enlightenment,” drew the attention of such thinkers as Immanuel Kant and Moses Mendelssohn, both of whom offered different solutions. Kant and Mendelssohn centered their argument on some of the early questions of enlightenment in Germany: To what extent is an enlightened citizenry possible, or even desirable? And, if it is indeed possible, what kind of censorship should remain on the people? According to James Schmidt, questions about free speech and censorship characterized the first phase of the enlightenment debate in Germany. The other two phases dealt with religion and the French Revolution respectively.<sup>8</sup>

For Immanuel Kant, enlightenment meant personal responsibility to reason. To be enlightened was to break free from one’s own “self-incurred immaturity,” and to “use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.”<sup>9</sup> Enlightenment was a difficult path, and the world was fraught with immaturity. Thus, leading up to his time, Kant saw only a select few, namely the philosophers, as truly freeing themselves. He knew that he did not live in an “enlightened age,” but he did believe that it was an “age of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 21-26, 34

<sup>8</sup> James Schmidt, “What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences” in *What is Enlightenment: Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in *What is Enlightenment?*, 58



enlightenment.”<sup>10</sup> Kant argued that enlightenment for the greater public was indeed possible. Not only was it possible, but “nearly inevitable” if only individuals were given the freedom to use their reason publicly. To use one’s reason publicly is to speak freely, to engage in open debate as scholars, beyond the borders of any single institution aside from the public itself. Within social and political institutions individuals may make use of their reason privately, that is to say they may use reason, but only to the extent that it does not conflict with the institutions themselves. For within the institution man is bound by duty and obligation to conform his reason and action. A clergyman must teach the dogma of his church, just as a tax-collector must collect as the law requires. They may oppose their duties publicly, in speech and print, appealing to the public or the institution itself for change, but privately, as their position within the institution requires, they cannot stray from their obligation.<sup>11</sup> If the people are allowed to speak freely and criticize their institutions in the public realm, then they will inevitably enlighten themselves as well as their institutions. At the center of Kant’s notion of enlightenment is the power of the individual to discover his or her own reason and to use it publicly. “Have the courage to use your *own* understanding! is the motto of enlightenment.”<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand Moses Mendelssohn sees enlightenment in a dual fashion; there is the enlightenment of man as a man (human enlightenment), and of man as a citizen (civil enlightenment). He writes, “The enlightenment of man can come into conflict with the enlightenment of the citizen. Certain truths that are useful to men, as men, can at times be harmful to them as citizens.”<sup>13</sup> Sometimes enlightenment cannot disseminate

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 59, 62

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 59

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 58

<sup>13</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, “On the Question: What is Enlightenment” in *What is Enlightenment?*, 53-56.

through all levels of society without damaging the state itself in the process. At this point the philosopher must not interfere; the state must take precedence to preserve order. Thus, there are times when the state must for the sake of man as a citizen withhold his enlightenment as a man. Mendelssohn's argument is similar to Kant's notion of the private and public uses of reason, but whereas Kant sees possible coexistence Mendelssohn sees potential conflict.

Scholars and politicians more in line with Mendelssohn spoke of a "relative" enlightenment, differentiated according to "time, place, rank, and sex." It then fell to the censor to determine the level of freedom and "expressive capabilities" appropriate to each class.<sup>14</sup> During his reign, Frederick the Great did in fact ease many of the censorship laws, causing Kant to praise him as the only monarch who says "Argue, as much as you about whatever you want, but obey!"<sup>15</sup> But other free speech advocates like Gotthold Ephraim Lessing criticized Frederick for withholding free speech on many political issues. Lessing argued that Frederick's policies only allowed for "idiotic remarks" without substance.<sup>16</sup>

The debate over enlightenment shifted into its second phase when Frederick the Great died in 1786. His nephew, Frederick William II, who followed traditional Christian ideals, relied heavily on the recommendations of more conservative advisors like Johann Christoph Woellner. In 1788 Woellner and the new king issued the Religion and Censorship Edicts, restricting many of religious freedoms Frederick the Great allowed during his reign. This brought a new question to the forefront of enlightened thinking: To what extent does enlightenment coincide with religion, and where do the

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<sup>14</sup> Schmidt, "What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences," 10.

<sup>15</sup> Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment," 59.

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt, "What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences," 3-4.

two diverge? To the men of enlightenment, superstition had no place in religion. With works like *Apology for the Rational Worshippers of God* and Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, enlightenment thinkers tried to promote a rational approach to religion, which in turn drew fire from conservative critics. Frederick William himself threatened Kant for misusing his philosophy to "distort and disparage many of the cardinal and basic teachings of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity."<sup>17</sup> James Sheehan argues, however, that along with rationalism, religious pietism played a major role in defining the *Aufklärung*. Thus, enlightened thinkers were not irreligious, but instead religious reformers, who sought to transform popular opinions on the subject in Germany, which is precisely why their critics so vehemently attacked them.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to remember that the *Aufklärung* was a socio-political movement as well as an intellectual movement. The ideas developed during the *Aufklärung*, as well as the Enlightenment as a whole, helped foster reading clubs and other such societies, which in turn affected real social and political change. Therefore, a reaction against intellectual concepts of enlightenment could very well be just as much a reaction against its socio-political consequences. In the conservative response to the religious debate, we see one of the first reactions against enlightenment, a reaction that characterized it as irreligious and destructive of traditional morality. This reaction was much more a social reaction than a philosophical one. Politically, both conservatives and enlightened thinkers still supported an absolutist state, but whereas enlightened thinkers supported it on rational

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>18</sup> James Sheehan, *German History, 1770-1886* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1989), 174-179; The questions of religious reform and universal enlightenment played into each other as well. Many enlightened thinkers intended their religious argument for only those who could actually read it. Thus, they often found middle ground with Woellner on preserving religious tradition among the lower classes. (See Schmidt, "What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences," 10-11)

principles, conservatives held on to the idea of traditional privilege. Thus, critics of philosophical enlightenment were not necessarily the same as critics of the *Aufklärung* as a social and political movement. Likewise, critics of the Enlightenment in France were not necessarily critics of philosophical enlightenment.

There was, however, a philosophical reaction to enlightened thinking beginning to emerge in the 1770's. Several thinkers like J.G. Herder

Abhorred enlightened despotism as a dictatorship of reason but resigned themselves to political absolutism by locating their opposing ideal in a historically sanctioned, vitalistic, organic freedom in the non-political realm of aesthetics, religious pietism, or national folk-culture.<sup>19</sup>

Also in the 1770's, writers like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe helped spawn a new literary movement, *Sturm und Drang*, which emphasized feeling over reason, glorified Germany's medieval past, and aggressively rejected foreign influences.<sup>20</sup> Henri Brunschwig argues, however, that the *Sturm und Drang* must be thought of as a precursor to the Romantic movement, rather than part of it. It would take several decades for most *Sturm und Drang* writers to make headway in areas where "reason continued to reign unchallenged," such as in Berlin. Also, the *Sturm und Drang* writers remained close to their enlightened influences; Herder became highly devoted to Kant and Goethe admitted his debt to Lessing.<sup>21</sup> Herder, Goethe and others mark the beginning of a second reaction to enlightenment, one that moved away from rationalism towards aestheticism. Later romantic thinkers picked up on this reaction and placed it at the center of their critique of enlightened ideas. Again, the idea of romanticism as an intellectual movement differs from the socio-political movement of Romanticism. Some

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<sup>19</sup> Krieger, 72; Sheehan, 184

<sup>20</sup> Henri Brunschwig, *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth Century Prussia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 92

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 94

scholars argue that romanticism is conceivable only in socio-political terms,<sup>22</sup> but the overwhelming emphasis on aesthetics and the self found in almost all romantic thinkers is hard to deny.

As revolution broke out in France the enlightenment debate entered its third and final phase. Thinkers were prompted to ask: Does enlightenment foster revolution, and is an enlightened revolution possible? The Revolution was proof for conservatives that enlightenment only led to chaos and complete disregard for traditional social order. Now more than ever the enlightenment debate took on a political tone. Several thinkers, like Kant, rejected any kind of “right to revolution,” while others thought revolution was acceptable as long as it occurred in framework of “moral enlightenment.”<sup>23</sup> Another of Kant’s disciples asked if living in a century of enlightenment was indeed “an honor or a disgrace.”<sup>24</sup> Reactions to the Revolution depended on the thinker, but early on it was met with some level of hope in Germany for the spread of enlightened ideas. As the years passed, however, and the Revolution became more and more radical, this enthusiasm soon turned to disillusionment and skepticism. The execution of Louis XVI, the September Massacres, and the Reign of Terror all alienated enlightened onlookers, and when Napoleon turned his eye towards Germany, conservative critics suddenly changed from alarmists to prophets. Once Germany was under French control the concept of enlightenment underwent profound changes. Some thinkers accepted French ideas of enlightenment, but opposed certain political measures brought on by French control. James Schmidt writes, “Because we tend to assume a natural affinity between the

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<sup>22</sup> Sheehan, 326

<sup>23</sup> Schmidt, “What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences,” 11-15.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 11

Enlightenment and liberal politics, we forget that many *Aufklärers* were not liberals.”<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, many thinkers in Germany promoted liberal politics but did not agree with enlightened ideas. Echoing later criticisms, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi found it absurd that anyone could support the “growing power of unrestrained autocracy” in enlightened absolutism, and at the same time argue about the dangers of religious superstition.<sup>26</sup> Thus, political reform during the period of French control was a unique mixture of both liberalism and absolutism, but ultimately, with the end of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, the idea of *Libertae* gave way to a new focus on individualized freedom, *Freiheit*.<sup>27</sup> The two men most responsible for reform during this period were Baron Karl vom Stein and Karl August von Hardenberg. Krieger argues these two men used the idea of revolution from above to retain the supremacy of the state and traditional social order while still bringing in new individualistic ideas.<sup>28</sup>

Western individualism in Germany had to contend not only with old absolutist ideas, but also with the growing aesthetic movement. By the end of the eighteenth century, Romanticism offered serious challenges to the *Aufklärung*. Much like the early aesthetic movement, the first generation of romantics did not consciously rebel against the *Aufklärung* as a whole, but saw themselves as fixing its problems.<sup>29</sup> One such man was the political reformer, Wilhelm von Humboldt. If Stein and Hardenberg tried to unite individualized freedom with traditional absolutist ideas, Humboldt tried to unite it with new aesthetic ideas. Leonard Krieger writes, “his fundamental unit was the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 12-13 Jacobi echoes the idea that enlightenment used reason to engender new forms of domination put forth G.W.F. Hegel in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and by Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, both of which will be discussed later in this introduction.

<sup>27</sup> Krieger, 146; On p. x Krieger calls the 19<sup>th</sup> century the “era of individualism.”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 140. For an in depth discussion of Stein and Hardenberg see Ibid. Pp. 147-165

<sup>29</sup> Frederick Beiser, “Early Romanticism and the Aufklärung” in *What is Enlightenment?*, 318.

individual, and his fundamental value the free development of his *spiritual* forces by the individual.” (emp. added)<sup>30</sup> This led Humboldt to emphasize a kind of “non-political individualism,” defined by feeling and emotion rather than rational thought. Such political aversion was the norm for early romantic circles, like the Berlin salons of Henriette Herz and Rahel Varnhagen, where Humboldt frequently visited. Although French occupation ultimately brought a new wave of liberalism and individualism into Germany, the fact that it was revolutionary in character and pushed by a “crusading army” left a negative imprint on the minds of many Germans, which remained long after the French were gone.<sup>31</sup>

After 1806, the Romantic movement adapted to the growing push for German liberation, and for the first time romanticism began to take on a political tone as well, one that was very nationalistic in character. No one was able to elucidate this new German nationalism better than Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who was as much an enlightened thinker as he was a romantic.<sup>32</sup> Drawing from Kant, Fichte conceived of a nation of moral individuals, making his earliest political writings “aggressively individualistic.”<sup>33</sup> His highest goal was the moral freedom of the individual, and to achieve this goal Fichte gave the nation a synthetic role between the individual and the state. Krieger writes, “individuals and governments are bound to each other and reciprocally limited only through their mutual participation in the supreme good of the nation.”<sup>34</sup> Fichte merged individual rights into an organic nation that expressed the “rights of all,” which were then

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<sup>30</sup> Krieger, 168

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 139

<sup>32</sup> James Sheehan writes “Despite his occasional flights into mystical fancy and the subjectivity implied by his emphasis on the ego, at the center of Fichte’s thought was a hard core of rationality. (p. 344)

<sup>33</sup> Krieger, 179

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 188

protected by the state. In his later writings, law became a necessary condition for morality.<sup>35</sup>

Intellectuals like Fichte expressed a feeling common to both liberals and conservatives brought on by the growing unrest under French control. Krieger writes “hostility to the French inspired the national *deus ex machina* which seemed to solve their problem of combining a measure of popular freedom with the structure of the traditional state.”<sup>36</sup> Liberals, in the hope of achieving a constitutional monarchy after liberation, adopted ideas of romantic nationalism. Indeed many romantics were more loyal to the ideas of liberalism than the men of the *Aufklärung* had ever been.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, political conservatives also adopted romantic ideas on the nation, particularly the idea of a uniquely German spirit. For them, nationalism became an increasingly irrational elevation of everything German, and liberation meant a return to pre-Revolutionary Germany.<sup>38</sup> Even liberals began to use the terms “nation” and “fatherland” rather indiscriminately to rally support for German liberation. So even though liberals and conservatives disagreed about the ends of national liberation, both felt equally called to action by the new ideas of nationalism being circulated by romantic intellectuals.

As we have seen, the first reaction to enlightenment was a conservative appeal to tradition. Conservatives argued that enlightened thinkers destroyed traditional morality when they tried to rationalize religion. In the wake of the French Revolution conservatives appealed to traditional authority and traditional German values as the basis

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 191

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 197

<sup>37</sup> Beiser, “Early Romanticism and the Aufklärung” in *What is Enlightenment?*, 321.

<sup>38</sup> After 1815 conservatives did manage to repeal many of the liberal reforms passed during the years of the French Revolution, leaving only the most basic structure of “non-political bureaucratic liberalism.” (See Krieger, 216-217)



of a new German nation. After the Revolution the conservative mentality found its greatest voice in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).<sup>39</sup> Burke argued enlightened thinkers denied the "latent wisdom" in tradition because they tried to cast off all prejudices, not realizing that prejudice itself has value.<sup>40</sup> The second reaction to enlightenment was an appeal to aesthetics that eventually led to the Romantic movement. Prior to the French Revolution many enlightened ideas were still used to promote aestheticism, which was not necessarily irrational. By the end of eighteenth century, however, romantics pushed the image of the rational individual to the background to replace it with the image of the emotional individual, or the self. Reason itself fell under attack as being self-destructive for its lack of emotion or concern for the self. More than any other thinker, G.W.F. Hegel philosophically justified this argument against the Enlightenment's concept of reason. Hegel did not want to abandon reason, but redefine it on his own terms.

According to Hegel, the Enlightenment tried to measure everything using the standard of utility, and in doing so turned reason into nothing more than an instrumental tool.<sup>41</sup> This leaves no room for the self, or self-consciousness, only individualized rationality that has no means of transcending itself. He instead conceived of a spirit that can understand the phenomenal world, while at the same time being able to transcend it. He demanded some kind of ontological purpose for morality, rather than being simply based on reason alone.<sup>42</sup> In its efforts to emancipate mankind through reason, the

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<sup>39</sup> Sheehan, 368

<sup>40</sup> Schmidt, "What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences," 17. In the twentieth century this argument was followed up by Hans-Georg Gadamer, who argued despite the Enlightenment's opposition to prejudice, reason itself rested on a "fundamental prejudice...[the] prejudice against prejudice itself." (p. 18-20)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 23-24; Sheehan, 351

<sup>42</sup> Krieger, 126-127

Enlightenment ultimately denied mankind any significance or feeling. Thus, the inevitable consequence is “death,” a cold rational death with “no more significance than cutting the head off a cabbage.”<sup>43</sup> For Hegel, moral freedom comes through the individual’s connection with a greater universal spirit, whether it is a world spirit that realizes itself in history, or a national spirit that realizes itself in politics. He argued that the state is “that form of reality in which the individual has and enjoys his freedom, but on the condition of his recognizing, believing in, and willing that which is common to the Whole.”<sup>44</sup> Spirit, in the form of the nation, emerges out of the dialectical relationship between the state and the individual. Hegel’s reaction to the French Revolution matched many of his contemporaries, and what began as enthusiasm ended in disappointment. He accuses the Revolution of destroying individuality rather than saving it.<sup>45</sup> Though Hegel tried to rescue reason and individuality by redefining them, he ultimately made them subservient in general to his idea of spirit, and in particular to his idea of nationalism. Like most other ideas of nationalism during the push for German liberation, Hegel’s ideas led to an endorsement of traditional political authority, even though he rejected Burke’s notion of tradition outright.<sup>46</sup>

Both Fichte and Hegel developed their philosophical critique of enlightenment based on events caused by the French Revolution, but they were not the only ones to do so. By 1815, one could not mention the Enlightenment without mentioning its ultimate outcome. James Schmidt argues,

With the French Revolution, discussion of the question “What is enlightenment?” came to a close. How one understood the Enlightenment

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<sup>43</sup> Schmidt, “What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences,” 21.

<sup>44</sup> Krieger, 132

<sup>45</sup> Schmidt “What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences,” 22, 24.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 21; Krieger, 137

came to be determined by the stance one took toward the Revolution. For critics of the Revolution, enlightenment was a process that undermined the traditional patterns of belief on which political authority rested and thus reduced politics to a brutal battle between despotism and anarchy. For those who remained loyal to what they saw as the ideals of the Revolution, enlightenment embodied the vision of a society governed by law and reason. As the new century dawned, the lines of engagement were clearly drawn. For the Right, enlightenment was a synonym for a political naiveté with murderous consequences. For the Left, it expressed the unfulfilled dream of a just and rational society. With both sides sure that they knew the answer, the question “What is enlightenment?” no longer needed to be asked.<sup>47</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Friedrich Nietzsche tried to re-open the question of enlightenment once again. He wanted to separate the idea of enlightenment from the Enlightenment itself as well as the French Revolution. According to Nietzsche, to approach the Enlightenment on its own terms was a no-win situation. In what he called “the dialectic of the counter-enlightenment,” Nietzsche saw that all attempts to resist the Enlightenment paradoxically turned out only to serve its causes. Also, the Enlightenment did not bring about the liberation of mankind, as was hoped, but instead quite the opposite, as Europe descended into even greater forms of darkness and domination. Thus, to save enlightenment from the Enlightenment one had to completely change the discourse.<sup>48</sup>

The death and destruction during the first half of the twentieth century laid bare the brutality of mankind. Answering Nietzsche’s call, many scholars returned to question of enlightenment to see if the potential for disaster had indeed always been there. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, following both Hegel and Nietzsche, argued that enlightenment, which tried to set the world free of mythology and superstition, only plunged the world in new forms of domination, which were

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<sup>47</sup> Schmidt, “What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences,” 15.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

actually worse than their predecessors because they had the illusion of reason. Whereas Hegel only knew of the Reign of Terror as the worst outcome of the self-destructive tendencies of enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno saw its culmination in the death camps of the Third Reich.<sup>49</sup> The two men argue that the concept of enlightenment creates a debate only with itself. In other words, “Enlightenment is totalitarian.”<sup>50</sup>

Enlightenment defines mythology and superstition on its own terms, and then triumphantly debunks them using those very same terms.<sup>51</sup> Thus, enlightenment’s struggle with mythology is really a struggle with itself. Hegel made the same argument for enlightenment and faith.<sup>52</sup> For Horkheimer and Adorno the notions of progress, positivism, and even mass society itself that followed all served to reify the inherent self-destructiveness of enlightenment.

Armed with her own insights and ideas Hannah Arendt stepped into this centuries-old debate. While no doubt indebted to many of the ideas preceding her, Arendt developed a system of thought all her own. Her artful yet at times aggressive style of writing won her fame as both a scholar and troublemaker. Although she has much to say on the individual and state authority, she does little to address the question of enlightenment directly. Thus, there are very few statements throughout her work where she explicitly states, “enlightenment is...” Likewise, a clear reaction to romantic thinking emerges in her overall system of thought, but rarely does she come out and say “romanticism is...” Instead, Arendt’s conceptions of enlightenment and romanticism have to be drawn out from her historical, political, and philosophical analyses. At the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 21, 24; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996), xvi.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 5-7

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 8; Schmidt, “What is Enlightenment? A Question, Its Context, and Some Consequences,” 23

center of Arendt's thought is the concept of human plurality: the idea that "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."<sup>53</sup> She proposes human plurality as a median between the individual and mankind as a whole. The key here is that Arendt did *not* try to reconcile the individual with any greater whole, be it state, nation, or mankind itself. She remained convinced that the individual has no place within the whole as an individual. Nor can the whole be made to fit concepts created solely for the individual. Human plurality as well is not an extended concept of the individual, or the whole, but instead, a concept in itself. And for Arendt not only is it a concept but a basic condition of our existence.

For Arendt, human plurality is essential to political action. To taint it with notions of individuality or universalism is to take away from its political character. According to Arendt, human plurality is given form when we insert ourselves into the public realm with "words and deeds." By maintaining a public realm in which politics can take place, speech and action become our most political attributes as human beings. This is something that cannot be done by the individual alone, but instead must be done together *with* others. Arendt comes into conflict with both enlightened and romantic thinkers because they try to maintain the supremacy of the individual, while at the same time subjugating him to a universal whole. Any thoughts of human plurality are snubbed out or redefined to fit an overtly individualistic system. Much like Horkheimer and Adorno, Arendt holds this kind of thinking responsible for the horrors of the twentieth century. Throughout her body of works she attempts to explain how these over-individualized concepts played themselves over the next two centuries, using the French Revolution, Jewish history, and totalitarianism as her examples. Like most other scholars

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<sup>53</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7.

of her time, Arendt wanted to find answers to help her come to terms with the utter disregard for human life that seemed to plague her century.

In the first chapter I discuss Arendt's initial response to the individualistic ideas she found in the late eighteenth-century salon society of Berlin. Simultaneously addressing her own Jewishness, Arendt chose to recount the life of a Jewish salonniere in her biography: *Rahel Varnhagen*.<sup>54</sup> Arendt paints a picture that is at times anything but flattering. She characterizes Rahel and the whole salon society as being ignorant of politics and naïve of reality. In several places Arendt turns the book into a polemic against romantic introspection. Finally, she uses Rahel to point out the problems of Jewish assimilation into Western European culture.

In the second chapter I discuss how Arendt used the ideas she developed in *Rahel Varnhagen* to further articulate her own ideas on society and politics. Using Jewish history and Zionism as her foundation, she explains how the unique case of the Jews in Western Europe illustrates the problems in modern conceptions of the individual and the state. She argues that Zionism itself was not immune to these conceptions, and lets her opinion be known on what she believes was right and what was wrong in the modern Zionist movement. In *The Jew as Pariah*<sup>55</sup> she uses the idea of the conscious pariah as an exemplary response to the conditions of the modern world, and in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*<sup>56</sup> she explains how totalitarianism epitomizes those conditions.

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<sup>54</sup> Hannah Arendt. *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, ed. Liliane Weissberg, trans. Richard and Clara Winston. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997)

<sup>55</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*. Ed. and Intro by Ron H. Feldman (New York: Grove, 1978).

<sup>56</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New edition with added prefaces. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1973)

In the third chapter I discuss Arendt's effort to fully conceptualize both the condition and consequences of human plurality. In *The Human Condition*<sup>57</sup> she differentiates between the three modes of human behavior: labor, work, and action. While labor and work form part of our basic existence, only action itself arises out the condition of human plurality. In *Between Past and Future*<sup>58</sup> she explains the anti-political tendencies inherent in the tradition of political thought, and she further elucidates her definition of freedom. Finally, in *On Revolution*<sup>59</sup> she addresses the question of the French Revolution. Although Arendt supports the idea of revolution as such, she regards the French Revolution as a failure because it ignored human plurality, which left it devoid of genuine political action.

In the fourth and final chapter I discuss the controversy surrounding Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*<sup>60</sup> and how she sought to validate her argument by clarifying her own philosophy in *The Life of the Mind*.<sup>61</sup> She argued that Eichmann was not evil, but lost his ability "to think and to judge," for himself. In order to prove such a claim Arendt set out to philosophically define thinking, willing and judging in her own terms. In doing so she came face-to-face with Immanuel Kant, whose three *Critiques* mirrored those same topics. Through her dialogue with Kant, Arendt came to justify not only her conclusions about Eichmann, but also her entire system of thought and her unforgiving stance that human plurality was indeed the basic foundation of politics.

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<sup>57</sup> See note #53

<sup>58</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, with introduction by Jerome Kohn. (Penguin Books, 2006)

<sup>59</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, with introduction by Jonathan Schell. (Penguin Books, 2006)

<sup>60</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, with introduction by Amos Elon. (Penguin Books, 2006)

<sup>61</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Life of the Mind*. 2 vols. (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978)

## CHAPTER 1

### RAHEL VARNHAGEN AND THE BERLIN SALON

#### From Confession to Introspection

During her university years a renewed interest in the analysis and application of Christian theology to the problems of the modern world surrounded Hannah Arendt. In the university, St. Augustine's *Confessions* took a primal position as a "pivotal and crucial text" to guide students in "self-exploration and the descent into the abyss of consciousness."<sup>1</sup> Arendt herself chose to focus her doctoral dissertation on the different notions of love in Augustine's thought, which she found useful in her thinking for many years to come. Though Arendt's mature thought is much more complex than her dissertation, many of the themes that appear in her later work as present in her thoughts on Augustine.<sup>2</sup> Throughout her career, Arendt continually used Augustine's ideas as a basis for comparison against modern notions of individuality and expressions of self.

In 1930, Arendt, like many other scholars, wrote a short article to commemorate the fifteen hundredth anniversary of Augustine's death. In "Augustine and Protestantism" Arendt argues Augustine realized in his *Confessions* that the age of Rome was coming to an end. But, he saw a new empire emerging in Europe, an empire not of this world, but of the soul. The spread of Christianity to pagan non-believers created a growing inner life, an empire in the hearts and minds of believers, all across Europe.<sup>3</sup> This was important for Augustine's idea of the individual man, because he adamantly

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<sup>1</sup>Hannah Arendt. *Love and Saint Augustine*. Edited with interpretative Essay by Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), xv.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wolin. *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press 2001), 43

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt. "Augustine and Protestantism" in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1945*. Edited with introduction by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books: 1994), 25.



believed man found his path to God in the inner soul, and that path was never the same for any two men. By recognizing God's saving grace within himself, each man recognized the individuality of his inner soul. This was not a recognition of the individual for its own sake, but instead for the sake of God alone. Upon exploring one's own individuality, one would ultimately find God and the redemption of His saving grace. A confession of the soul, like the one Augustine gave, was a testament to the grace of God in an individual's life, but it was also a reminder of the universality of mankind. Arendt writes, "The individual confession carries a general applicable meaning: God's grace can enter any and every individual life in this same way."<sup>4</sup>

For Arendt, there is a progression from the ancient Greeks who confessed for the glory of man, to Augustine who confesses for the glory of God. The Greeks regarded the unknown parts of the inner life, which they declared to be outside the realm of reason, as separate from the soul. For Augustine, however, these sinful and sometimes unknown parts of our inner lives were indeed part of the soul. The Catholic confessional comes almost directly from Augustinian ideas of confession. The institutionalized confessional, however, "By its very nature...altered the original meaning of confession" because it "places the authority of the Church between the soul and God." This is a corruption of Augustine, according to Arendt, because "Augustine confesses to God alone, not to other human beings."<sup>5</sup> Although Augustine's confession is not for the sake of the individual himself, it is still a task that the individual alone must realize in communication with his inner soul. The confessional simply placed a barrier on the individual realization of the soul. For Arendt it was the Protestant conscience that tore down that barrier. She

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<sup>4</sup> "Augustine and Protestantism," 26.

<sup>5</sup> "Ibid., 27

believed that Luther reached back and rescued Augustine by creating the concept of the believer whose individual conscience stands in direct relationship to God.<sup>6</sup> Arendt argued, however, that just as the Catholic confessional perverted Augustine's ideas, so too did many modern interpretations of individuality pervert Luther's notion of a Protestant conscience. Beginning with Descartes' *Meditations* and finding full expression during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the idea of confession came full circle back to Greek notions of self, where the individual once again confessed for the sake of himself alone, leaving God behind. In Arendt's eyes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau solidified the destruction of Luther's Augustinian recovery when he created a *Confessions* of his own, which despite taking its namesake from Augustine, completely inverted his ideas. Rousseau, his contemporaries, and his followers usurped Augustine's notions of individuality, and they irrevocably changed the meaning of confession forever. "With increasing secularization, religious self-reflection [read: confession] before God lost its meaning. There was no longer an authority to confess to, and religious self-reflection therefore became simply reflection on one's own life, devoid of the religious element."<sup>7</sup>

Rousseau's *Confessions* were for a notion of truth, so that the reader, seeing this visible monument he constructed for himself, could use it to draw conclusions about human nature. Liliane Weissberg writes in her introduction to Arendt's *Rahel Varnhagen*, "It is no longer God, but the reader, who is asked for forgiveness and understanding...Rousseau insists on his individuality while trying to transcend it."<sup>8</sup> Rousseau's confession is epistemological and anthropological, meant to discover the

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<sup>6</sup> As will be discussed in chapter 4, Hannah Arendt is quite possibly the pre-eminent philosopher of political conscience. It was arguably one of her highest intellectual goals to establish such a philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> "Augustine and Protestantism," 27.

<sup>8</sup> Liliane Weissberg "Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, and the Writing of (Auto)biography," introduction to *Rahel Varnhagen*, 9.

nature of truth and human nature itself. Rousseau argued that truth is transcendent by the fact that it is universally valid and universally accessible to the reason of every individual. Here Rousseau turned Augustine on his head in suggesting that the confession could exist for its own sake and not for the sake of God.

In Germany, the idea of self-expression as confession found its greatest support in the writing of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Arendt argues that Goethe wrote in a highly confessional style. He expressed himself through his characters, who gave detailed confessions in the style of Rousseau. These confessions were often times symbolically autobiographical, reflecting Goethe's own personality. Because of this Arendt suggests that his works were "fragments of a great confession."<sup>9</sup> Goethe, mirroring Rousseau, attempted to portray his individual characters through "autonomous self-development."<sup>10</sup> Arendt writes: "It is amusing to note how closely the assimilation of the Jews into society followed the precepts Goethe proposed for education in his *Wilhelm Meister*." In the novel, a young burgher sets out to achieve acceptance into high aristocratic society. To do so he has to play the role of an aristocrat, mimicking them exactly in thought and action. "Everything depended on 'personality,' and the ability to express it."<sup>11</sup> A "cultivated personality" is the romantic form of confession. Goethe's Meister confessed himself only to be recognized by others. The young burgher had to show his new personality to others so they could acknowledge and approve it. His individuality meant nothing outside the already prescribed world of the aristocracy. Confession was then no longer about individuality, but instead acceptance and assimilation. Meister's "cultivated personality" and his individuality were completely hollow.

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<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt "Berliner Salon" in *Essays in Understanding*, 61.

<sup>10</sup> "Augustine and Protestantism" P. 27

<sup>11</sup> *Origins*, 59-60

Arendt's critique of Rousseau and Goethe found its fullest expression in her analysis of a late eighteenth, early nineteenth century Jewish salonniere by the name of Rahel Varnhagen. Not only was Rahel an outspoken advocate of both Rousseau and Goethe, but she was also the embodiment of many of their ideas. She felt compelled to confess in own her way through countless letters of self expression to friends and family. Arendt's biography, *Rahel Varnhagen*, is an attempt to understand Rahel through her letters, but it is also a critique of the conceptions of individuality she found in Rahel and her fellow salonnières, which stood in sharp contrast to the ideas Arendt familiarized herself with in her study of Augustine and his *Confessions*.

Jewish migration into Prussia from Austria began a century earlier when the Jews were kicked out of Vienna for little reason more than being Jewish. Berlin opened its doors in 1670 to the more prosperous Jews who brought in opportunities for trade. This led to the development of a small but wealthy Jewish community in Berlin and upper class Jews soon began to distance themselves from other less affluent Jews living throughout the Prussian countryside.<sup>12</sup> Making up only about two percent of the greater Jewish population, the Berlin Jews became an increasingly integrated part of Prussian high society. By the time of the *Aufklärung*, wealthy Jews in Berlin achieved levels of acceptance and social equality that were rarely seen elsewhere in Germany. Yet despite being accepted into Prussian society, they could never escape their status as Jews. Being Jewish was still seen as something negative one had to overcome. Jews in general had no political rights and the rights given to wealthier Jews were given not because of any political acceptance but instead because of a newfound social acceptance. Arendt writes,

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<sup>12</sup> James Van Horn Melton *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 221.

“A political struggle for equal rights might have taken the place of the personal struggle. But that was wholly unknown to this generation of Jews.”<sup>13</sup> The more assimilated Jews became the more they wanted to leave any traces of their Jewish names and heritage behind. Rahel Varnhagen was no exception. Even from an early age she wanted to escape her identity as a Jew, her ‘infamous birth.’<sup>14</sup>

Rahel Varnhagen—born as Rahel Levin in 1771—was certainly a product of her time. Educated in German romantic literature and enlightenment philosophy, she assimilated quickly into Berlin high society. In addition to being well-known within the Jewish community, Rahel also socialized with many upper class Christians, such as Prussian nobles and intellectuals. Rahel and her Jewish friends took hold of the salon culture in late eighteenth century and virtually ran Berlin social life until 1806. Being born under the rule of Frederick the Great, Rahel was lucky enough to come of age during a high period of German culture. She clung to the words of romantics like Goethe, and found solace in the thinking of enlightened idealists like Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Rahel displayed a unique combination of enlightened rationalism and romantic introspection precisely because German thought combined these two modes of thought more anywhere else in Europe.

Thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing helped promote rationalism with ideas like *Selbstdenken*, or “self-thinking.” Lessing conceived of self-thinking in terms of individualized rationality, “to think for one’s self,” which influenced Kant’s notions of enlightenment that came shortly after. Reality was filled with rational truths, universally valid and equally attainable by all men. Rational self-thinking was not

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<sup>13</sup> Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 88

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 92, 103

an escape from the experience of reality, merely an analysis of it. Lessing believed that in addition to rational truths there were also historical truths, equally accessible through rational thought. He argued “the mature individual recognizes ‘historical truths’ by virtue of his reason,” reason meaning a capacity for rational thought.<sup>15</sup> Rahel herself once wrote, “Everything depends on self-thinking.”<sup>16</sup> Rahel’s notion of self-thinking, however, did not come directly through Lessing.<sup>17</sup> It came instead through his friend and contemporary, Moses Mendelssohn, a prominent Jewish philosopher living in Berlin a generation before Rahel. Mendelssohn shared many ideas with Lessing but differed from him in a few key areas. He did not accept Lessing’s idea that the individual could rationally derive truth out of history. History was for Mendelssohn an accidental outcome occurring randomly from an infinite number of possibilities; there was no way to rationally approach it. Reason did not manifest itself in history. “‘Historical and rational’ truths are separated so finally and completely that the truth-seeking individual himself withdraws from history.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, self-thinking becomes a completely inward-looking function. Mendelssohn’s self-thinking “brings liberation from objects and their reality, creates a sphere of pure ideas and a world which is accessible to any rational being without benefit of knowledge or experience.” Arendt argues this was “a thought that would hardly have occurred to the men of the Enlightenment,” including Lessing.<sup>19</sup> Mendelssohn brought a notion of romanticism to self-thinking, making it exist purely for an individualistic notion of truth, as Rousseau had done. In doing so pure self-thinking then became introspection. Introspection, according to Arendt accomplishes two things:

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 92

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 90, 289

<sup>17</sup> See chapter 4 of this thesis for Arendt’s argument on the perversion of Lessing’s term.

<sup>18</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, 92

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 90

it dissolves all existing situations into moods and it gives an aura of objectivity to everything subjective.<sup>20</sup>

In *Rahel Varnhagen* Arendt argues that Rousseau exemplified this modern “mania for introspection,” so much so that he even eliminated the need for memory that had been so crucial to Augustine’s notion of confession.<sup>21</sup> Arendt writes:

If thinking rebounds back upon itself and finds its solitary object within the soul—if, that is, it becomes introspection—it distinctly produces (so long as it remains rational) a semblance of unlimited power by the very act of isolation from the world; by ceasing to be interested in the world it also sets up a bastion in the front of the one “interesting” object: the inner self. In the isolation achieved by introspection thinking becomes limitless because it is no longer molested by anything exterior...Reality can offer nothing new; introspection has already anticipated everything.<sup>22</sup>

For Arendt, arguing as Augustine would, it is through memory that we discover the reality of the outside world. That the outside world has some degree of reality to it is something introspective thinkers find “highly disturbing.” Arendt accuses Rousseau, and Rahel, of what she calls “sentimental remembering,” where the present is drawn up from memory into the subjective self where only introspective feelings remain; everything is eternally present and memory becomes nothing more than potentiality. The distinction between past and present no longer exists. Arendt adds Rahel’s own words of “Facts mean nothing to me at all” to further drive home her point.<sup>23</sup> Arendt continues to illustrate Rahel’s addiction to introspection by saying:

The more imaginary a life is, the more imaginary its sufferings, the greater is the craving for an audience, for confirmation. Precisely because Rahel’s despair was visible, but its cause unknown and incomprehensible to herself, it would become pure hypochondria unless it were talked about,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 99

<sup>21</sup> Both Arendt and Augustine argue for memory as a crucial part of the thinking process itself. See chapter 4 of this thesis.

<sup>22</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, 91

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

exposed...She needed the experience of others to supplement her own...The more people understood her the more real she would become.<sup>24</sup>

Because Rahel's existence was based solely on an attempt to gain the recognition of others, Arendt accuses her of being indiscreet and shameless. Arendt applies these qualities not just to Rahel, but to the modern notion of confession in general. Arendt again returns to Rousseau, whose *Confessions* were the "first great model of indiscretion." In Rousseau's *Confessions* the self is completely exposed to the anonymous future reader. But according to Arendt, posterity loses the ability to judge and forgive because it simply becomes the fantasized means for reflecting and perceiving the inner self.

The solitude of the would-be confessor becomes boundless. The singularity of the person, the uniqueness of the individual character, stood out against the background of indefinite anonymity. Everything was equally important and nothing forbidden. The importance of the emotions existed independently of the possible consequences, independent of actions or motives.<sup>25</sup>

The absence of inhibition is necessary because of the similar necessity Rahel felt to destroy all avenues of silence, which would allow for the greatest possible outer response and reinforcement of the internally created reality. This is why Rahel wrote so many letters exposing herself to her readers, and why she set up her salon to mirror this practice. For Arendt, because this reality was internally created, then it was indeed a false reality, obscuring any notion of truth in order to maintain its own existence. It would seem to be synonymous with the modern ideological mindset.

There is little doubt that Rahel held both Rousseau and Goethe in the highest esteem. She repeatedly referred to her letter-writing as a form of confession, and even

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 97-98

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 98



signed a letter to a friend “Confessions de J.J. Rahel,” which was a play on the elongated title of Rousseau’s own work, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. The influence of Rousseau and Goethe took physical manifestation in Rahel’s salon which, in fact, started out as a reading circle dedicated to Goethe. In the salon, all of Rahel’s notions of individuality and introspection came to fruition. Rahel and her fellow salonnières were able to create a culture of their own within the realm of the salons. Outside the salon their ideas fell apart when met with the experiences of reality and history, and indeed Rahel would have to face this first hand when the Napoleonic wars broke down the salon culture in 1806. But for a time Rahel and her friends exported their ideas to all of Berlin, molding it in their image. The salons set the pace for cultural life in Berlin during the late eighteenth century.

#### The Birth and Death of the Berlin Salon

According to Hannah Arendt, “Berlin social life had a brief genesis and short duration,” coming to fruition during the French Revolution and being extinguished with the Napoleonic Wars in 1806. Arendt of course does not mean that Berlin had absolutely no social life prior to or after this short period, for even Rahel herself was still socially active beyond 1806. But for Arendt, during this short period of time the salon culture created in Berlin its own unique mixture of enlightened and romantic ideas that influenced German thought and social organization for generations to come. Although affected by the Enlightenment in France, the salon culture was largely a continuation of the *Aufklärung*, which was particularly German. Arendt argues the fact that salon culture

in Berlin developed slightly later than other salon movements in Europe meant it was mostly isolated in Berlin itself and considerably more private in nature.<sup>26</sup>

The first Berlin salon, called the League of Virtue (*Tugendbund*), began in the 1780s. A prominent Jewish woman by the name of Henriette Herz ran the salon in which the League met. Like many other influential Jewish women in Berlin, Herz was highly assimilated into German culture and married to a Christian man, Marcus Herz, a well-known physician and intellectual. Though Marcus Herz often gave lectures to the League, and both men and women attended, in the salon men played a secondary role. “In those days the women were actually the agents of social assimilation.”<sup>27</sup> Still the salon was thought to be socially neutral, a place where men and women, scholars and artists, bourgeois and noble, Christians and Jews all met on equal ground. Arendt is quick to point out however, “this idea of the equal rights of all good human beings first gave rise to the kind of indiscretion we have come to regard as typically Romantic.”<sup>28</sup> Members of the salon were obligated to show each other all important personal letters as a means of self-disclosure. Among the members was the daughter of Moses Mendelssohn, Dorothea. Arendt uses Dorothea as a means to critique her father’s philosophy. She writes “she [Dorothea] could with some justice and without too great malice be considered the perfect product of her father’s naively ambiguous orthodoxy.”<sup>29</sup> Arendt accuses Dorothea of having no concept of reality outside her self-centered emotional state of mind. Dorothea fell in love with the well-known intellectual Friedrich

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<sup>26</sup> “Berlin Salon,” 57

<sup>27</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, 108

<sup>28</sup> “Berlin Salon,” 58

<sup>29</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, 107

Schlegel, eventually leaving her husband and children and running to him “like a moth to a candle.” Arendt writes:

Dorothea did not learn to know the world, but only Schlegel; she did not belong to Romanticism, but to Schlegel; she was not converted to Catholicism, but to Schlegel’s religion. She wanted to ‘build a temple’ to him. Her love was completely unreflecting, only the reflected expression of her fascination...The world was nothing but the passing foil for her emotions, for all the churned-up passions within her. When, in her old age, the passion withered, she became bigoted.<sup>30</sup>

Just as Moses Mendelssohn refused to acknowledge the reality of history, or at least acknowledge its role in self-creation, so too was Dorothea stuck in her own self-created world where nothing had meaning outside what she gave to it. Dorothea had assimilated to point of self-annihilation; she was nobody except what she thought others wanted her to be. Her “cultivated personality” was her only reality. Unlike Dorothea who was overly emotional, Henriette Herz had a cold rationality to her. Herz interpreted the “virtue” of her salon to mean personal dedication to reason, as defined by Lessing. Rahel and others felt that she avoided personal experience far too much, and they thought by the end of her life she would not really have lived at all. Eventually disagreements over the meaning of concepts like “self-thinking” caused the more romantic-leaning members of the League, like Rahel, to branch out and form their own salon.

While attending the League of Virtue, Rahel’s reputation as an educated and intelligent socialite began to grow, and slowly a circle began to develop around her as well. Herz and Rahel did indeed have much in common, and except for some of the details in their lives, the two followed very similar paths. Rahel’s own salon formed as people began to leave the League and was solidified as its successor within a few years. Rahel and her friends pushed themselves even further into romantic ideas. Her

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 107-108

generation found “its own mode of expression in its reverence to Goethe...He was their spokesman.”<sup>31</sup> Again the salon valued no member as higher in rank than any other. As Rahel said, ‘each of them acquired neither more nor less value than he himself was able to establish by virtue of his *cultivated personality* (emp. added).’<sup>32</sup>

In Berlin, beginning with the more enlightened salon of Henriette Herz and finding its full realization in Rahel’s romantic salon, private life slowly lost any level of intimacy. The indiscretion of the salon meant that “private life itself had acquired a public, objective quality.”<sup>33</sup> Arendt adamantly argues that the private and public realms are inherently separate from one another. By trying to mix them, or destroy the distinction between the two, the salons skewed the definitions of objectivity and subjectivity, and created a false reality for both realms. The upheaval caused by the Napoleonic Wars in 1806, proved too much for the salons to continue their fantasized view of the public world. Arendt writes:

The salon in which private things were given objectivity by being communicated, and in which public matters counted only insofar as they had private significance—this salon ceased to exist when the public world, the power of general misfortune, became so overwhelming that it could no longer be translated into private terms. Once more everything personal was being decided by things that affected everyone...The possibility of living without any social status, ‘an imaginary Romantic person’...was now blocked off. Never again did Rahel succeed in becoming the actual center of a representative circle revolving solely around her own personality. Never was she able to forget the period which was now gone forever.<sup>34</sup>

After 1806, salon culture once again took on a new shape, this time forming around a new group of people and taking on a much more exclusive and patriotic nature.

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<sup>31</sup> “Berlin Salon,” 59

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 61

<sup>34</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, 176-177

Conservative, high ranking civil servants, who up to this point could not compete with the Jewish salonnières, were the new central figures in Berlin's social life. The first group to emerge in Berlin along this vein was called Zelter's Singing Circle (*Zeltersche Liedertafel*), named after its founder. The group was meant to 'cultivate the art of song and further the national idea.'<sup>35</sup> The Singing Circle was supposed to be a glee club, but it was really a political club in disguise to hide itself from the censors. Wilhelm von Humboldt once wrote after attending a meeting: 'things are too serious there to permit any singing.'<sup>36</sup> From the Singing Circle came the Christian-German Table Society (*Christlich-Deutsche Tischgesellschaft*), a private club with an outspoken conservative nationalist mindset. The Table Society stood in opposition to all of the social changes seen during the *Aufklärung*, and likewise rebelled against the inroads to liberalism that the Napoleonic occupation brought with it. They rebelled "intellectually against the Enlightenment, politically against France, and socially against the salons."<sup>37</sup> Rahel and her fellow salonnières were, for their part, kicked out of high society in Berlin.

Although the Table Society did not share Rahel's romantic views, it was still highly romantic in its own ways. The Table Society, and conservative Prussian nationalism, advocated a kind of anti-Enlightenment romanticism. They scoffed at the supremacy of reason and instead emphasized a universal spiritual and emotional connection with the world and among the German people. They politicized romantic aestheticism by combining it with Prussian nationalism, to promote the idea of a German spirit. This idea of a universal spirit among all German people provided nationalist fervor that was much needed in the fight against Napoleon. However, this mindset did

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<sup>35</sup> "Berlin Salon," 62

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 63

<sup>37</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, 178

not die down once Napoleon was gone, and the romantic conservatives maintained their grip on German politics. Furthermore, the universal German spirit was universal only insofar as one was a pure-blooded German Christian male. Membership in the Christian-German Table Society was forbidden for women, Jews, and Frenchmen—all equated with the *Aufklärung*'s corruption of Berlin society.<sup>38</sup> Arendt argues that these 'political Romanticists' emerged as a conservative reaction to recreate the exclusivity of the Prussian noble class in both high society and politics.

Rahel continued to socialize during the years following the downfall of her salon, though in a slightly more limited fashion. The crises of the day forced her to reconcile the created reality of the salon with the actual reality of the public world, which now called for a certain level of recognition and adaptation. Some of the members of Rahel's pre-war salon fought and died in the Napoleonic Wars, others continued to play a role in Berlin social life through more conservative circles like the Table Society, and several others fell off into obscurity and anonymity. Anonymity was, of course, completely opposed to the self-revealed individual of Rahel's salon who craved recognition from others at all times. It was certainly not a path Rahel saw for herself. Yet, her subjective ideal was crushed by the weight of history. Rahel had to somehow find her way in a world that seemed alien to her. In an effort to rescue herself from despair, Rahel turned to the new nationalistic ideas stirred up by the French control, of which she found the ideas of Johann Gottlieb Fichte most consoling.

In response to the Napoleonic Wars, Fichte published a series of lectures entitled *Addresses to the German Nation*, which were a continuation his philosophy of history developed a few years earlier in his *Fundamental Principles of the Present Age*. Using

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 178

these two works as her guide, Rahel found new hope for the possibilities of her role in the world. Yet the level of abstraction in Fichte's ideas allowed Rahel to take from them what she wanted without fully understanding their complexity. Fichte's philosophy reinforced Rahel's deterministic quietism when he wrote in his *Fundamental Principles*: "time proceeds along its fixed course, which is determined by Eternity, and no single force can hasten or force anything within it."<sup>39</sup> This obviously struck a chord with Rahel's desire to withdraw from the objective world and create her own reality. Fichte argued that "the course of history is *a priori* determined; it remains only for the philosopher to trace its laws." Rahel could be content to be uninvolved in the world as long as she understood its reasons. Arendt calls it Fichte's "duality of the power and impotence of man in history."<sup>40</sup> No doubt Rahel felt impotent in the face of the uncontrollable circumstances surrounding the Napoleonic Wars, which caused her to be pushed to the periphery of Berlin social life and dashed her hopes for equal acceptance. With the world coming down around her, she at least needed to understand why.

Fichte's ideas, however, were not static, and the picture of reality he presents in his *Addresses* is not the same as his *Fundamental Principles*. In fact, some of his conclusions stand in direct opposition to previous ones. Arendt argues that Fichte ultimately found his dualism "highly unsatisfactory" because he could not find an answer to it. But as Arendt points out, for "the unsophisticated hearer," like Rahel, "he appeared to resolve it forthrightly enough."<sup>41</sup> In his *Fundamental Principles*, Fichte argued for the idea of five world epochs, beginning with the time before history when man was ruled by instinct and ending in an age where mankind has formed itself into an image of Reason.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 181

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

In his *Addresses*, Fichte dropped the first and last epochs because he no longer liked the idea of Being as a fixed and unchanging entity. He wrote. “Whoever believes in a fixed, permanent, and dead Being, believes in it only because he is dead in himself.” For him freedom meant “not being rational but becoming rational.”<sup>42</sup> Readers like Rahel were lost in the complication of Fichte’s transition. For his new philosophy Fichte chose to focus on a single epoch from his previous succession: the epoch of rational science, where truth is recognized and loved supremely by mankind. Thus, Fichte no longer sought terminal progress in mankind with a clear utopian endpoint, but instead a never-ending progression when man takes the given present, understands its reasons, and from there makes a yet unrealized future. This gave man a new power to create history, rather than simply standing by and watching idly. Fichte, however, argued that there was always going to be a given existing world that could only be taken passively. The world to come, which was still *a priori* because it was pre-determined by the laws of reason, could be a world of change. But it will always be a world to come, eternally in the future, for once it is in the present it loses its ability for change, it simply is. Fichte’s notion of meaningful action comes with respect for realizing a future existence. The way to bring about change is to find the truth in the present and understand the laws of reason at work, so that they can be realized in the future. Fichte here seems to take on a kind of Platonic idealism towards the notion of progress: that the love of Truth and not its utopian realization is the only reality. We can never obtain Truth itself, that is pure Reason, or pure Being, because there will always be a part of us stuck in this world, Fichte’s profane present. Still, just because we can never become a true reflection of Reason does not mean that we cannot organize ourselves to produce the greatest love for Reason in our

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 182



societies. Thus, in the *Addresses* Fichte called for a German nation with a breakdown of all social barriers, similar to what Rahel advocated in her salon, a place where all classes came together guided by truth rather than tradition, birth, and history.

Rahel found her sense of nationalism on similar terms. Fichte writes “the individual person is absorbed by the concept of the whole, is absolutely forgotten in a unity of thought.”<sup>43</sup> This reinforced Rahel’s idea of subjectivity. It was simply her notion of the salon expanded to fit the German nation, and it gave her a new sense of conviction. According to Arendt, “to belong to a new community, then, Rahel needed to annihilate herself and her origin.” She in essence had to not be Jewish anymore, something she had striven for her entire life. It was a loss of any kind of pre-existing identity so that Rahel could start anew simply as herself. In a future shaped by pure thought she did not need to be anything except part of that consciousness, which if her salon was no longer open to her could take the form of the German nation. The complexity of Fichte’s thought left it open to much interpretation, and Arendt notes that “ultimately, she [Rahel] took over from him nothing but an empty pattern which could be used to comprehend everything and nothing. Her new patriotism, which so often had embarrassing overtones, was nothing but a premature conclusion which she derived from Fichte under the oppressive force of circumstance.”<sup>44</sup> Ultimately Rahel’s patriotism, though helpful for a short while, did not help her break through her social isolation. It eventually faded in her, and she sought new ways to re-enter society.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 183

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 183-184

## Parvenus and Pariahs

The upheaval caused to high society in Berlin by the Napoleonic Wars left Rahel with no place to truly be herself anymore. She no longer had a place in the new, highly conservative, salon culture of Berlin. The assimilation once offered by participation in the salons was now closed to her. Rahel either had to accept her social isolation or find new forms of assimilation out in the world. Different from the salon, where identity was created and self-willed, to the point even of destruction of any world outside its own, assimilation in the world meant that Rahel had to alter her identity to fit an already prescribed uniformity. That uniformity was the norms and attitudes of the Prussian noble class. Unlike in the salon, where nobles humbled themselves to participate in isolated individual self-creation, Prussian noble society had a well-established worldly identity. To be a part of it meant coming into prescribed norms of behavior, attitude, and self-identification that not only had consequences for social assimilation, but for political assimilation as well. Assimilation in the salon could be apolitical because it created its own world, but assimilation in the outside world had inherently political implications. The Prussian noble class was a political class, populated by bureaucrats and administrators, and they tried to define political identity exclusively in their own image. For a person to be truly political, according to Arendt, meant the ability to represent oneself through speech and action in the political realm. For Arendt, this is the source of all power in politics.<sup>45</sup> In Prussia, the aristocratic privilege of the noble class had long been associated with the power of the state. Their social position reinforced their political power and their political power reinforced their social position. That is precisely why Rahel and so many others tried to gain political power through social recognition.

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<sup>45</sup> See *The Human Condition*, 199-206

And because nobles defined acceptable society, the path to political power (i.e. political participation) meant adherence to the norms of noble society. Prussian nobles tried to limit political participation to those who were most like themselves. Thus, German Christian males (preferably noble) were the only one who could actually participate in government, that is hold offices and create policy. Foreigners, Jews, and women were simply not allowed. While women were given political identity through their husband or father, Jews had no political identity whatsoever. The only group that actually gained any level of political participation was the bourgeoisie. Though looked down on socially by the nobility, the bourgeois fit the basic criteria for political participation. As they grew in strength and number, and enlightened monarchs like Frederick the Great appointed political offices based more on merit than title, the bourgeoisie entered the ranks of the bureaucracy at a rate that alarmed many conservative nobles. Jews, on the other hand, had no path to political power outside assimilation, and in her desire for political identity, Rahel decided that assimilation was the only choice.

Rahel felt the exclusivity of the Prussian noble class all her life because of her Jewishness. The Jews were an apolitical class, and the Prussian nobility sought to keep it that way as long as possible. Not only were Jews apolitical in the sense that they could not represent themselves through political speech and/or action, but even basic political rights given to most other subjects of the state, like equal protection under the law, were denied to the Jews. Any civil protection, of which there was some of varying degrees, was given to them as a gift of the state. Heidi Tewarson, another biographer of Rahel, argues that despite gains in social acceptance, Jews were still forced to conform to elaborate political regulations that taxed them heavily, restricted their rights to certain

businesses, and held them collectively responsible for any act committed by a Jewish person. Even Frederick the Great, “the so-called enlightened king, was particularly adept at devising new schemes for filling his treasury” with money taken from the Jewish community.<sup>46</sup> Rahel simply could not define herself politically while being Jewish at the same time. She managed to escape this dilemma within the walls of her salon, where any previous notions of self (like being a Jew) were destroyed, but after 1806 it faced her head on once again.

Rahel had always admired the French Enlightenment, as seen in her emulation of Rousseau, but she did not see Napoleon as the liberator of the Jews. A process of limited emancipation had been going on in Prussian for decades. The Napoleonic Wars corrupted that process by pushing wholesale emancipation on the German people by force. Influential Jews during the *Aufklärung* worked towards edicts of emancipation and legal protection for a limited number of Jews at first, namely those assimilated Jews of Berlin high society. Assimilated Jews based their self-identity on the idea of exceptionality. They hesitated to bring about full-scale emancipation as much as their noble counterparts. The idea was a moderate expansion of political rights starting with the most exceptional Jews and then eventually spreading to the more ordinary ones. Full-scale emancipation would not only liberate the educated Jews, but also the ordinary, “backward,” Jews, and the distinction on which the social status of the exceptional Jews stood would suddenly disappear.<sup>47</sup> Ordinary Jews could never hope to assimilate as a class, because to have exceptional Jews the rest of Jewish society had to be just that, ordinary. As long as exceptional Jews were kept limited they could be accepted into

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<sup>46</sup> Heidi Thomann Tewarson. *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1998), 18-19.

<sup>47</sup> *Origins*, 60-68

Prussian society *as Jews*, but at the same time *not like Jews*. In other words, by controlling assimilation Prussian noble society kept the power to define what it meant to be Jewish, namely being apolitical.<sup>48</sup>

When liberal Prussian reformers during the Napoleonic Wars brought the discussion and eventually passage of wholesale emancipation to the forefront, conservative Prussian nobles resisted it tooth and nail. The family of Rahel's former fiancé, Count Finckenstein, even helped lead a coalition against the reforms of Baron Karl vom Stein and Karl August von Hardenberg.<sup>49</sup> Other more modest plans of emancipation prior to 1806 were now looked upon as equally dangerous and disruptive. In January 1808 Stein passed legislation granting full-scale citizenship to all German subjects in the largest cities regardless of rank or birth. This legislation sought to abolish many of the restrictions to individual civil liberties placed on the Jews like a ban on intermarriage (without conversion), restrictions on trade and banking or special taxes just for Jews, and barring them from military service. By alleviating the Jews of all these weights it was hoped that more Jewish capital would come into circulation and Jewish people in general would be more open to adopting German ways of life.<sup>50</sup> This was a success in some ways as many Jews did in fact help support the Wars of Liberation against Napoleon several years later.<sup>51</sup> Orthodox Jews, however, enjoyed their isolated lifestyle and wanted nothing to do with the German people or the state. Many of the Jews in the early *Aufklärung*, like Moses Mendelssohn, were fighting anti-Semitism on one

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 56-57

<sup>49</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, 110

<sup>50</sup> Brunswick, *Enlightenment and Romanticism in Eighteenth Century Prussia*, 288-290

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 291-292

front and Orthodox Judaism on the other.<sup>52</sup> Mendelssohn was reproached for teaching in German or even reading it in the place of Hebrew. Yet, Mendelssohn marked the beginning of new Jewish movement of assimilation and eventual equality in Berlin, during which Rahel's salon found great influence and acceptance. It was a slow movement, however, and reforms during the Napoleonic Wars tried to push it as fast as it could go. In 1812, under the leadership of Hardenberg, another sweeping edict solidified mass Jewish emancipation and gave equality to Christians and Jews in virtually all areas.

Arendt, however, was quick to point out the difference between civil rights and political freedom.<sup>53</sup> Arendt calls the edict of 1808 municipal emancipation because it simply legalized the civic privileges already enjoyed for the most part by wealthy urban Jews. This municipal emancipation outlived the Napoleonic era, and stayed intact for the most part after 1812. According to Arendt, the edict of 1812 was much more threatening to the Prussian nobility and already assimilated Jews because it destroyed the distinction between ordinary and exceptional Jews. This would mean that ordinary Jews could start to make inroads in political participation outside of the prescribed norms of Prussian noble society. It created such a backlash that even assimilated Jews like Rahel were no longer welcomed, regardless of assimilation and whatever municipal freedoms had been given to them. To be an emancipated Jew during the Napoleonic Era was suddenly no more profitable than being a non-emancipated one before it. Many assimilated Jews preferred conversion to Christianity rather than being labeled as an "emancipated Jew," for that was surely the path to complete social exile.<sup>54</sup> After the Napoleonic Wars the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 261

<sup>53</sup> *Origins*, 60

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 59

edict of 1812 was practically rescinded to ensure that German Christian males retained their monopoly on political participation.

The Napoleonic Wars left the Prussian nobility and Berlin high society with a distaste for Judaism that lasted long after Napoleon was gone. The anti-Semitism that permeated the salon society during the war carried over into post-Napoleonic Prussia, in which social exclusion was now added to a reinstatement of political exclusion. If anything, the Napoleonic Wars strengthened anti-Semitism among the most conservative circles, where a Jew was always a Jew no matter what they did or how they changed. Soon, the Napoleonic Wars became synonymous with the end of *Aufklärung*. Rahel mourned her loss: “Until now I have lived under the auspices...under the wings, of Frederick the Second. Every pleasure from outside, every good, every advantage...can be ascribed to his influence: this has been shattered over my head.”<sup>55</sup>

Prior to 1808 Jews that wished to keep their religion were allowed to socially assimilate with an understanding that it was impossible for them to gain political assimilation as a Jew. If Jews wanted genuine political self-identification that meant they had to conform to Prussian noble society and all its norms, meaning they had to renounce their Jewish origins and marry into the nobility. A Jew could be a parvenu (one who assimilates) and a Jew at the same time only if they accepted the definition of Jew given to them by Prussian noble society. This path was open to Jews in the generation before Rahel's, and several assimilated Jews opted to give up their aspirations of a political existence in order to keep their heritage and religion. Moses Mendelssohn did just that. Berlin high society had to accept him *as a Jew*. So, although Mendelssohn had access to all levels of society, and socialized with Berlin's leading political figures, he never had a

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<sup>55</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, 240

political existence of his own making. This was the price he paid for remaining Jewish in a society where his role had already been prescribed for him. Indeed, many of Mendelssohn's friends simply acted as though he wasn't a Jew, in order to feel more comfortable accepting him.<sup>56</sup>

Mendelssohn's indifference to politics was not all that different from Rahel's escape into her salon; and Arendt was critical of them both. The salons carried on the tradition of political avoidance started by the Jewish intellectuals. Escape into the life of the salon was commonplace, and even before the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars and the downfall of the salon, conversion to Christianity and marriage into the Prussian nobility was the norm for assimilated Jews. After the Napoleonic Wars, however, the path to social acceptance that Mendelssohn and other Jews opened was now closed. Full-scale assimilation was the only option left open. It was either assimilate by renouncing all ties to Judaism or suffer the consequences of social isolation. Rahel chose the former.

In her period of uncertainty Rahel had turned to the ideas of Fichte, in which she found justification for a new kind of philosophical nationalism. Yet, the Prussian noble class was not as eager to throw off the old bonds of birth and rank. They embraced their own kind of nationalism, where Rahel would have to fully assimilate, leaving all vestiges of herself and her "infamous birth" behind. To re-enter high society, and to define herself politically as she had never done before, meant she had to deny any notions of self-creation or self-identification outside Prussian noble society. In 1814, Rahel solidified her decision when, upon converting to Christianity, she married Karl August Varnhagen von Ense, a Prussian nobleman and member of the diplomatic corps. For several years she followed her husband around in his diplomatic duties. She followed

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<sup>56</sup> Sheehan, 176



him to Vienna in 1815 where she saw firsthand the discussion deciding the fate of a post-Napoleonic Europe. After Vienna Varnhagen was stationed in southwest Germany, where he and Rahel remained until his retirement in 1819, upon which the two of them returned to settle in Berlin.

Rahel's seemingly unabated assimilation earned her the title of parvenu in Arendt's eyes. According to Arendt, a parvenu is a person who gains recognition and inclusion into a society by completely abandoning any notions of self-identification outside that society. Becoming a parvenu was a common path for both bourgeois and Jewish individuals to be accepted into noble society. For the bourgeoisie this meant playing into exclusionary practices like birth and rank by taking on titles of their own. The bourgeoisie, however, was a growing power, and beginning to identify itself on its own terms. Jews, on the other hand, "if they wanted to play a part in society, had no choice but to become parvenus par excellence."<sup>57</sup> This path, to become a parvenu, was still only open to exceptional Jews. Ordinary Jews had to first become exceptional, or make themselves not like Jews, only then did they have a chance at complete social assimilation.

As a parvenu Rahel managed to escape her Jewishness, but she soon realized that if she wanted to keep her social and political status she would not only have to forget her "infamous birth" as a Jew, but also everything else about herself before she became the wife of a Prussian noble diplomat. This meant she would have to indefinitely become her now formal title, Frau Friederike Varnhagen von Ense. She was not only leaving behind Rahel Levin, the Jew, but she was also leaving the Rahel of the salon behind, the self-made woman who lived according to truth and reason. This was something that Rahel

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<sup>57</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, 238

could never come to terms with no matter how hard she tried. While away from Berlin, Rahel immersed herself in her new lifestyle only to find out that it came up short of her expectations. She understood she would have to leave her Jewishness behind, but she thought she would still be able to create her own identity in other ways. As a parvenu however there was no means to self-creation, only examples to follow. Rahel wrote, “Now I have to behave toward people as if I were nothing more than my husband; in the past I was nothing, and that is a great deal.”<sup>58</sup> So Rahel began to re-create a life for herself much as she had done in her salon earlier in life; but this life had to be lived “altogether inwardly” through her letters and diaries, for Rahel learned all too well that she could no longer express it outwardly.

Rahel truly believed in the genuineness of her experiences in the salon. She could not “forget the insights she had, nor emancipate herself inwardly from them...no amount of ‘civil improvement’ could compare with it.”<sup>59</sup> For all her outer emancipation and newfound political existence she could not emancipate herself from herself. “One had to pay for becoming a parvenu by abandoning truth, and this Rahel was not prepared to do.”<sup>60</sup> Rahel’s marriage to Varnhagen was her attempt to see how far a Jewish-born woman in nineteenth-century Prussia could go in the political realm. What she found was she could go very far by assimilating herself in every possible way, but it would never be enough. Rahel gained a degree of political self-expression through her husband that she could never have achieved in the salon alone. She was accepted into a part of Prussian aristocratic society populated by those who ran the government at the highest levels. In Vienna, the delegates to the Congress stayed with Rahel and her husband

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 245

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 242

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

where she no doubt had many conversations with them on politics, society, and the state. And of course she also had her husband's ear. But that was as far as she could ever go. She would never be allowed the same kind of political existence as her husband. She was given a role to play, and she was expected to play it. After awhile she simply grew tired of only doing what she was told. Her total assimilation had left her feeling like little more than a hand-puppet. As a woman her political voice was no more genuine than when she was a Jew in pre-Napoleonic times, all forms of genuine political participation were still closed to her. She could get close, and indeed she did, but never actually achieve her goal. She might have been able to leave her Jewishness behind, but she would always be a woman, and as such be limited to the roles given to her.

Rahel's experiment as a parvenu ultimately left her unsatisfied and she came out the other end as a pariah. A pariah is a social outcast or one who has no place in society. Jews in Rahel's time were all pariahs to a certain extent, but Rahel made the leap to become a "conscious pariah," that is someone that recognizes their anti-social position and tries to come to terms with it as part of their reality, rather than trying to escape it through the mask of a parvenu. Rahel did not want to be Friederike Varnhagen any more, and upon returning to Berlin in 1819 she had no desire to become Rahel Levin once again either. She no longer had the will for "fraudulent self-identification" as Friederike, but as Rahel Levin she was still a socially unacceptable Jew in post-war Prussia. Stuck in between a parvenu and a pariah Rahel found solace in her attitude at a young age. Now in her fifties, she admitted she saw herself in the same light that she did at fourteen or sixteen. It was her idea of the self-made woman, defined on her own terms and no one else's, not even history's. She wrote, "All my life I considered myself [just] Rahel and

nothing else.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, she returned to her old romantic notion of herself, a self created through individual introspection.

In her waning years Rahel came to the realization that she was always a Jew, whether or not she admitted it. It was only as a Jew that she could recognize her humanity, as well as the humanity of others. Arendt writes,

In a society based upon privilege, pride of birth and arrogance of title, the pariah instinctively discovers human dignity in general long before Reason has made it the foundation of morality...The parvenu pays for his loss of pariah qualities by becoming ultimately incapable of grasping generalities, recognizing relationships, or taking interest in anything but his own person...the pariah, precisely because he is an outcast, can see life as a whole...this is his sole dignified hope: ‘that everything is related; and in truth, everything is good enough.’<sup>62</sup>

Rahel’s Christianity, her marriage, and other parvenu qualities were never genuine. The only truth she found in them was an answer to her seemingly impossible predicament of being Jewish. But she never loved Varnhagen, and she did not have the tastes and attitudes of a Prussian noble. Being a parvenu was ultimately untrue to herself.

Arendt focuses much of her thought and energy on the intricacies of social and political assimilation because as a Jew under the Nazi regime she saw firsthand the potentially fatal consequences of assimilation taken to its extreme.<sup>63</sup> Most of Arendt’s work in some way deals with the problems of the modern world seen under the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. In studying and defining totalitarianism

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 247

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 248-249

<sup>63</sup> Richard Wolin argues that Arendt’s distaste for assimilation can be seen as the rejection of her “youthful Germophilia.” Growing up she had great admiration for everything German, and truly believed that her Jewishness mattered little for her personal and professional ambitions. Growing anti-Semitism in Germany and an ill-fated love affair with her teacher, Martin Heidegger, hardened Arendt’s once optimistic outlook. She developed a passion for Zionism and became extremely critical of assimilation in all its forms. She even turned against the philosophy of her former lover, though she reconciled with him and his thinking several years later. (See Wolin, 44). Wolin writes, “*Rahel Varnhagen* thus embodies an uncompromising rejection of the false hopes of Arendt’s youth.” (p. 47)

Arendt created a single concept that epitomized everything unique about totalitarianism and the forces that drove it; that concept was the idea of superfluous humanity.<sup>64</sup> It served as the conceptual basis for all of Arendt's arguments in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and its implications appear in Arendt's thought throughout all her other works. Although Arendt wrote most of *Rahel Varnhagen* before *Origins*, she was still looking for answers to the problems of totalitarianism through the life of Rahel. Arendt saw totalitarianism as the result of the modern world's acceptance of superfluous humanity. This superfluity, however, began much earlier than the twentieth century, and Arendt goes all the back to Rahel's time to find its roots. In *Origins* Arendt divides its development into three steps or intervals, which culminate in the historical realization of totalitarianism. Each of these steps—anti-semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism—is defined by a kind of superfluity, or dehumanization, which eventually led to the complete disregard for human life of the totalitarian regimes.

Through the anti-semitism of Rahel's age, and the attempts of enlightened and romantic thinkers to deal with it, Arendt saw the development of her first stage—social superfluity. Social superfluity usually appears as assimilation to the point of losing the ability for self-identification outside the prescribed roles of a given society. Anti-Semitic society, however, seeks to make the Jews socially superfluous whether they become a part of that society or not. They either take the path of the parvenu and assimilate to the point of self-annihilation<sup>65</sup>, or they choose the life of a pariah, remaining outside of

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<sup>64</sup> For a good analysis of Arendt's concept of superfluous humanity see Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. by Ross Guberman, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001), 101-169.

<sup>65</sup> It is self-annihilation for Arendt because she identifies political action and political speech as the highest forms of self-expression and self-identification. The parvenu does not create himself through genuine political action but instead through prescribed norms already present to him. Actively denying oneself the opportunity to have a political voice in Arendt's eye is annihilating the possibility of genuine self-realization.

society, superfluous to anything going on within it. “Jews felt simultaneously the pariah’s regret at not having become a parvenu and the parvenu’s bad conscience at having betrayed his people and exchanged equal rights for personal privileges.”<sup>66</sup> In an effort to curb the social superfluity of anti-Semitic societies both enlightened and romantic thinkers focused on the idea of universal acceptance into society for everyone based solely a recognition of their common humanity.<sup>67</sup> This would mean that Jews could become full members of society without having to destroy their means to self-identification. But Arendt saw in these universal conceptions of mankind an overemphasis on commonality that ultimately subsumed the inherent diversity of humanity. To recapture the individual from this abyss, enlightened and romantic thinkers over-emphasized individual subjectivity to the point where it isolated the individual from all humanity, creating alienation and superfluity all over again. Alienation and superfluity are symbiotic concepts. Alienated individuals often take the path of assimilation, but if assimilation is pushed too far, then the system (or society) is unable to differentiate individuality any longer and all members become superfluous. This created the paradox of the modern world: how to combine individuality (whether rational or introspective) and universalism in the same breath. Arendt saw through anti-Semitism that some people would never be allowed to fully assimilate. They would always being alienated and potentially superfluous. As Arendt understood it, the social superfluity established in Rahel’s time eventually led to greater troubles in the following centuries like economic and political superfluity, which we will discuss in the following chapter.

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<sup>66</sup> *Origins*, 66

<sup>67</sup> Enlightenment rationalists would say that this common humanity is based on the presence of reason in all people; reason meaning the capacity to acknowledge universally valid rational truths.

## CHAPTER 2 SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN THE MODERN WORLD

One of the most distinctive features of Hannah Arendt's thought is her insistence on the divide between "society" and "politics." Her harshest criticisms in *Rahel Varnhagen* are leveled at the parvenu, who substitutes social acceptance for genuine political action. Yet, Arendt's own conceptions of society and politics were anything but static, and indeed she continued to work on them throughout her entire life, polishing her thinking over an entire body of works. Richard Bernstein confirms that, "although Arendt insisted on the distinction between society and politics, and emphasized the importance of political responsibility and action by the Jewish people, she was initially quite vague about the *meaning* of politics" (emp. in text).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, her conception of "society" underwent several changes before she settled on what she believed to be the defining factors of the modern age.<sup>2</sup> Over time, she continued to develop her understanding of both society and politics, but always kept an emphatic separation between the two. In this chapter I will discuss Arendt's application of these concepts first to Jewish history and question of Zionism, and then to the phenomenon of totalitarianism and its place in the modern world.

### High Society

In her 1974 work, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, Margaret Canovan identifies high society as one of the "strands of meaning" that structured Arendt's thinking on the concept of society as such. "High society with its characteristics and vices: the fashionable world, originally composed only of a tiny segment of the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bernstein *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996), 10.

<sup>2</sup> For a quick summary on Arendt's views on society see Hannah Fenichel Pitkin. *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1-16.

population, in which appearances were all important, and where the desire to be in fashion and make a good impression led to an ape-like conformity and the vice of hypocrisy.”<sup>3</sup> The need for acceptance is a peculiar phenomenon, but it is also an extremely powerful one. As Arendt saw it, certain individuals would go to great lengths to ensure the approval of their cultural “betters,” completely alienating themselves from the world around them and severing any connection to reality in the process. Again, for Arendt this is the path of the parvenu, which I outlined in the previous chapter as a central theme in *Rahel Varnhagen*.

In her next project Arendt wanted to take her ideas from *Rahel* and fully explain their implications for society and politics in the modern world. She wanted to know all the possible responses for the pariah, not just the path of the parvenu. What followed was a series of provocative essays, posthumously collected and published under the title *The Jew as Pariah*.<sup>4</sup> They were Arendt’s most comprehensive look at the “Jewish question” to date. Although her ideas on the basic nature of pariahdom did not significantly change, there is a break between *Rahel Varnhagen* and *The Jew as Pariah* that is much more than just a shift in style. Arendt wanted to make the concept of pariahdom central to the essays, but by the time she finished writing *Rahel Varnhagen*, roughly 1933, Germany was in a state of social, political, and intellectual upheaval. Anti-Semitism reached new heights, and Arendt seemed to be at a turning point in history, just as Rahel had been. Over the next decade, Arendt’s life was forever changed by the Nazis’ rise to

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Canovan. *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*. (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1974), 105-106; *The Attack of the Blob*, 17

<sup>4</sup> The majority of the essays in *The Jew as Pariah* were published between 1942 and 1948 during Arendt’s time in New York. Thus, they often take on the collective title of The New York Essays. There are a few essays at the end of *The Jew as Pariah*, however, that came much later. Published during the 1960’s, they were Arendt’s response to the criticism she received for her ideas in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.



power. She saw firsthand many of the things come to fruition that she warned about in *Rahel Varnhagen*. The devastating reality of the concentration camps and the Holocaust gave Arendt a more fierce resolve than ever to expose the problems of the modern world and to explain how such a thing could have happened.

Unlike Rahel, Arendt was not ashamed of her Jewish background, and she was certainly not afraid to show it. Many scholars have pointed out that her analysis of Rahel was a way for Arendt to better understand her own Jewish identity. The study of the “Jewish question” drove her as both a scholar and a social pariah. As a young adult, she began to actively participate in the Zionist movement, where she found the tutelage of such Zionist intellectuals as Kurt Blumenfeld. Arendt came to greatly admire Blumenfeld, and she soon saw him as the father figure she had always wanted.<sup>5</sup> Her own father died when she was very young, and it was something she was still dealing with as a young adult. In the movement Arendt encountered ideas by Zionist intellectuals both old and new, many of which formed the basis of her thinking on society, politics, and the Jewish question for years to come. *The Jew as Pariah* essays (also called the New York essays) were Arendt’s attempt to elucidate and analyze many of these ideas. But, there was also a personal dimension to *The Jew as Pariah* based on Arendt’s own experiences with totalitarianism.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933 it was clear to Arendt that anti-Semitism was about to come to the forefront of German politics. Still, her resolve did not shrink, and she continued to act openly and proudly as a Jew. Naturally, this brought her to the attention of the Nazis, and she was arrested for Zionist activity that same year. After

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Young-Bruehl. *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.), 70.

being held for a few days she was fortunate enough to be let go.<sup>6</sup> Realizing how dangerous the situation was and how close she came to her possible death, Arendt decided to leave Germany for good. She took refuge in Paris, as did so many other German intellectuals of her day, where she awaited the fate of the Jewish people, as well as the fate of all of Europe. From the safety of Paris she watched as the Nazi and Stalinist machines grew larger and more terrifying with each passing day. By 1940 Germany was ready to unleash its aggressions on neighboring France. In May 1940 the French government, still independent of Nazi control, began placing ‘enemy aliens’ into internment camps, in a last ditch effort to prepare themselves for invasion. Arendt was sent to Gurs, in southern France near the Spanish border, where she, along with thousands of other German immigrants, awaited the coming storm. Reflecting on her time at Gurs, Arendt later wrote that contemporary history created a new kind of humanity, one where people “are put into concentration camps by their foes and into internment camps by their friends.”<sup>7</sup> The disarray caused by the Nazi advance into France that summer helped Arendt, as well as almost two-thirds of the other internees at Gurs, secure liberation papers. Interestingly enough, Gurs became one of the largest concentration camps in Western Europe, where many Jews who ended up at Auschwitz and other death camps began their journey. By the end of the summer the Nazis had overtaken all of France, including Gurs, and set up a sympathetic French government at Vichy. While the ‘Aryans’ were accepted back into Germany, those with Jewish origins waited uneasily to see what would happen next. In October of 1940 the Vichy government decreed that all Jewish people must register themselves or be arrested.

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt later attributed this to the rapport she developed with her guard, who was quite uncertain how to act against someone who he knew had not yet committed a crime.

<sup>7</sup> *For Love of the World*, 152

Arendt and many others refused to obey this order because they knew it meant they would be sent to concentration camps. She decided then it was time to leave Europe altogether and take refuge in America. In January 1941, after barely avoiding arrest, Arendt and her husband, Heinrich Blucher, were able to obtain visas that allowed them to leave for America via Lisbon, Portugal.

After arriving in America (New York City) Arendt went to work on the essays that would later comprise *The Jew as Pariah*, but her personal experiences and the catastrophes taking place in Europe were never far from her mind. Arendt was no longer warning about the dangers of assimilation. She had seen the consequences, she knew how real the death and destruction could be. The New York essays were meant to be a wake up call for Americans as well as displaced Europeans as to what it truly meant to be a Jew in the modern world. As the horrors of the Holocaust came to light, Arendt had all the evidence she would ever need.

#### A Social Response to a Political Question

The central theme of the New York essays is Arendt's critique of modern Zionism from its inception at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century to her own time, when Zion was no longer just a dream. The first of these essays, "From the Dreyfus Affair to France Today" (1942), introduces two of the most important figures of the early Zionist movement: Theodor Herzl and Bernard Lazare. In 1896 Theodor Herzl published an extremely influential pamphlet entitled *The Jewish State, or Der Judenstaat*, in which he laid out his vision for the future of the Jewish people and the founding of a new Jewish state in Palestine. He gained many followers very quickly and within a year he founded the First Zionist Congress, which officially created the World Zionist Organization. Bernard

Lazare made a name for himself shortly after in 1898 when he was elected to the Actions Committee alongside Herzl at the meeting of the Second Zionist Congress. Yet, the two men had very different ideas on what it meant to be a Jew in the modern world, as well as what kind of thinking should define the Zionist movement. Unable to reconcile his ideas with the dominant trends in Zionism, Lazare left the movement in 1899. From then on Lazare fell into obscurity and Herzl's *Jewish State* led the way in the Zionist movement for the next fifty years. Despite Herzl's popularity, in Arendt's New York Essays she clearly identifies more with Lazare. Much of her criticism of modern Zionism is the accusation that it was ultimately a result of Herzl's ideas and not Lazare's. Thus, Lazare becomes, in Arendt's eyes, a forgotten hero of the Zionist tradition. Essentially, the New York essays were her attempt to both revive and continue his work.

Before Arendt went into her full criticism of Herzl and his effect on modern Zionism she wanted to explain in a pair of essays, "We Refugees" (1943) and "The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition" (1944), all the possible responses to pariahdom and why Lazare's ideas were in fact the most apt and most significant for modern Jews. In "We Refugees" Arendt uses her own unfortunate situation as an example of the utter failure of assimilationist and parvenu attitudes towards the problems of pariahdom. Arendt says that these options were no longer viable because in the modern world pariahdom was no longer a social question but a political one. "So long as the Jews of Western Europe were pariahs only in the social sense they could find salvation, to a large extent, by becoming parvenus."<sup>8</sup> But, once the political action was taken to make assimilation impossible, as in the Nuremberg race laws for example, and political rights were defined in the basis of ethnicity, there was no longer room for either the parvenu or the pariah. Arendt writes,

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<sup>8</sup> *The Jew as Pariah*, 89

“History has forced the status of outlaws upon both, upon pariahs and parvenus alike.”<sup>9</sup> In the end, parvenuism is not only “self-destructive” but also a source for the potential destruction of all pariah groups. Arendt realized that “the outlawing of the Jewish people in Europe has been followed closely by the outlawing of most European nations.” The circle continues to shrink and shrink, eliminating difference each time it goes. This is only reinforced by “the political and moral absurdities of trying to create ethnically homogeneous nation-states out of multi-national societies.”<sup>10</sup> Soon, entire groups of people are kicked out of the state, “denationalized,” simply for being different. What follows then is a mass of refugees, “stateless” people, with no place to exercise true political action because no state will take them. Arendt argues “The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted.”<sup>11</sup>

No more is the parvenu’s lifestyle more seductive than to the refugee, who is forced to flee from place to place, taking on new identities wherever he may roam. Arendt makes light of her own experience saying, “After four weeks in France or six weeks in America, we pretend to be Frenchmen or Americans.”<sup>12</sup> The refugee is then taken on the roller coaster of “megalomania and hopeless” that characterizes the life of the parvenu because they so crave recognition, always looking for the next “sign” from society as to their acceptance or rejection. “The smallest success so hard-won,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 66

<sup>10</sup> Seyla Benhabib. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 44.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 66

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 56

necessarily dazzles him with an illusory: everything is possible; the smallest failure sends him hurtling back into the depths of his social nullity.”<sup>13</sup>

In “A Hidden Tradition” Arendt discusses the concept of the conscious pariah as the only political response to pariahdom. She calls it hidden because only a minority of Jews in the modern world ever came to conclusion that they had be both political and a pariah at the same time. Arendt credits Bernard Lazare with inventing the concept, which for the first time brought the Jewish question in the arena of politics. Both Arendt and Lazare speak of a duty for the conscious pariah not only to avoid the path of the parvenu, but also take action against it.

He saw that what was necessary was to rouse the Jewish pariah to a fight against the Jewish parvenu. There was no other way to save him from the latter’s own fate—inevitable destruction. Not only, he contended, has the pariah nothing but suffering to expect from the domination of the parvenu, but he is destined to pay the price for the whole wretched system...Politically speaking, every pariah who refused to be a rebel was partially responsible for his own position<sup>14</sup>

And how does the pariah become a rebel? By entering into the realm of politics and by engaging in genuine political action. Remember that this is impossible for stateless persons because no state will allow them the opportunity to do so. Again, this is one of the reasons Arendt is so critical of “high society” and why she insists on keeping it separate from politics. Lazare and Arendt place the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of pariah alone. Arendt argues that many of the problems that surfaced during the Dreyfus Affair were the result of the actions of parvenus, but “immeasurably more serious was the fact that the pariah simply refused to become a rebel.” The majority of

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<sup>13</sup>*The Jew as Pariah*, 25, 54; *Rahel Varnhagen*, 201-202. It is interesting to note that Arendt opens her section on totalitarianism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* with the quote, “Normal men do not know that everything is possible.” For Arendt, the phrase, “everything is possible,” was the calling card of the totalitarian movements and represented everything wrong with modernity.

<sup>14</sup> *The Jew as Pariah*, 76-77

Jews did not realize that by avoiding political action they turned themselves into a “prop,” holding up the existing social order from which they were excluded.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the conscious pariah, Arendt details three other responses to pariahdom that, although different from being parvenus, still have negative consequences because they equally fail to address the political aspect of being a pariah in the modern world. The first of these is what Arendt calls the “lord of dreams”, the poet, or the schlemiel. This is the pariah who seeks to escape the world in which he is a social outcast, usually replacing it with a world of his own making. Rahel Varnhagen fit this category for most of her life, and indeed Arendt accuses the whole of the salon culture as being permeated with such thinking. She writes, “For the pariah, excluded from formal society and with no desire to be embraced within it, turns naturally to that which entertains and the delights the common people.”<sup>16</sup> What Arendt meant by this was that the pariah as a dreamer seeks a more egalitarian approach to existence. This of course is epitomized in salon culture, where the pre-existing individual does not exist at all, and everyone is judged based on one’s own created personality. Furthermore, Arendt explains an exaltation of nature goes hand in hand with the pariah as a dreamer for several reasons. First, the power of nature is more appealing to “the common people” because of the disenchantment of the modern world. Over several centuries secularization whittled away the thought of nature as a spiritual reality. But the idea still remained in the back in the minds of the common people, who were outsiders to high society anyway. Second, if high society has the power to exclude the pariah from its ranks, then the pariah has to find a source of power for himself. The creation of a rival

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 78

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 71

society serves this purpose very well, and indeed it was one of the key purposes for the creation of the salon culture. But, creating a rival society and ensuring its existence is not an easy task, as Rahel could attest to based on the destruction of her salon and the culture accompanying it in 1806. Also, pariahs are labeled as pariahs precisely because they lack to power to define themselves otherwise. So, the dreamer finds the answer in the power of nature, where he devalues high society in the face of an overwhelming natural order. Arendt writes that the dreamer cannot help but “smile to himself at the spectacle of human beings trying to compete with the divine realities of nature. The bare fact that the sun shines on all alike affords him daily proof that all men are essentially equal.”<sup>17</sup>

Confronted with the natural order of things, in which all is equally good, the manifold classes and ranks must appear a comic, hopeless attempt of creation to throw down the gauntlet to its creator. *It is no longer the outcast pariah who appears the schlemihl, but those who live in ordered ranks of society and who have exchanged the generous gifts of nature for the idols of social privilege and prejudice.* (emp. added)<sup>18</sup>

For the dreamer, the reality of the social order, in which they are a pariah, is confronted with the reality of a higher order. The social order then pales in comparison because the higher reality is of course “natural.” Arendt chides this way of thinking by arguing the poet’s cheerful indifference “could hardly be expected from the more respectable citizen, caught up as he was in the toils of practical affairs and himself partly responsible for the order of things.”<sup>19</sup> Arendt is most critical of the dreamer because he is irresponsible, to himself and to others, and he is essentially politically irresponsible, unwilling to engage himself in any kind of true political action. Dreamers only want to “hold a mirror” up to the political world, not join it.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 72

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 73



A second response for the pariah is that of the suspect. She bases this concept on the typical characters portrayed by Charlie Chaplin, the likable miscreant whose bad name makes him presumably guilty for any and all wrong doing. His outsider status solidifies him as a deviant and his deviance convinces normal society to make him an outsider.<sup>20</sup> The representatives of respectable society, of law and order, chase him relentlessly, and the common man can not help but sympathize with him because they “recognize in him what [high] society had done to them.” Therefore, the suspect is not much different from the dreamer; both are essentially innocent, only being condemned because of how high society labels them and they both appeal to the common people. The suspect is fiercely independent and cares little for the conventions of high society, but he does not pretend to dream of a higher reality where he is no longer an outcast. He realizes his position, much as the conscious pariah does, but does not think he can change it. He is instead “worried” and “careworn.” It is a sense of hopelessness that fills his life.<sup>21</sup>

Arendt’s third response to pariahdom comes from her analysis of the writing of Franz Kafka. She calls this concept “the man of good will.” The man of good will analyzes his position as a pariah much the same way as the dreamer, by looking for a common humanity in which he could also be included. But Kafka does not want to escape the world; he is a realist, and he details the real problems of the pariah in his novels. Coincidentally, the year that Arendt wrote “A Hidden Tradition” was also the twentieth anniversary of Kafka’s death. So, in another article published that same year, “Franz Kafka: A Revaluation,” Arendt similarly defends Kafka as a realist. She argues

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<sup>20</sup> Bernstein, 36

<sup>21</sup> *The Jew as Pariah*, 79-81

that the nineteenth-century novelist and his bourgeois readers “desired more events and more happenings than the usually narrow and secure framework of his own life could offer him.” Kafka, on the other hand, knew “in our world [the 20<sup>th</sup> century] real events, real destinies, have long surpassed the wildest imagination of novelists.”<sup>22</sup> As a man of good will, “His desires are directed only towards those things, to which all men have, a natural right...He demands no more than that which constitutes every man’s right...he seeks nothing more than his minimum of human rights.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, as Arendt notes, in doing so he does exactly what the high society wants the pariah to do, to abandon any pre-existing notions of self, to be “indistinguishable” from all others. Although Arendt celebrated many of Kafka’s ideas, he still fell into the trap of the man of good will. She writes:

In Zionism he saw means of abolishing the ‘abnormal’ position of the Jews, an instrument whereby they might become ‘a people like other peoples.’ Perhaps the last of Europe’s great poets, he could scarcely have wished to become a nationalist. Indeed, his whole genius, his whole expression of the modern spirit, lay precisely in the fact that what he sought was to be a human being, a normal member of human society. It was not his fault that this society had ceased to be human, and that, trapped within its meshes, those of its members who were really *men of goodwill* were forced to function within it as something exceptional and abnormal (emp. added).<sup>24</sup>

Arendt finds something admirable in each of these responses to pariahdom, even if she is critical of them as a whole. She praises each of her proto-types—Kafka, Chaplin, and Heinrich Heine (a 19<sup>th</sup> century poet, Arendt’s dreamer)<sup>25</sup>—as contributing to the hidden tradition and fighting against the tradition of assimilation, of the parvenu. Each of them exhibited qualities of the conscious pariah, but remained deficient in one area. The

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<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt. “Kafka: A Revaluation” in *Essays in Understanding*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> *The Jew as Pariah*, 85

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 89

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66; See *Rahel Varnhagen* for Arendt’s praises of Heine (p. 277).

dreamer is innocent and independent, but not a realist. The suspect is realist and is innocent, but remains dependent on others for his refusal to take action. And finally, the man of good will is independent and a realist, but is not innocent because he is willing to label himself as a social pariah as long as he is included into humanity based on natural rights.

In 1945 and 1946, as the Jewish State was coming closer to a reality, Arendt returned to the question of modern Zionism and the legacy of Theodor Herzl. Zionism was important to Arendt not only because of her personal involvement in the movement, but also because it played such a major role in her theoretical constructions. The Zionist was a conscious pariah and a rebel against society, but most important of all Zionism was “the only political answer the Jews ever found to anti-Semitism.”<sup>26</sup> In “Zionism Reconsidered (1945)” and “Herzl’s Jewish State: Fifty Years Later” (1946) Arendt argues that in modern Zionism all the ideological implications of Herzl’s *Jewish State* came to forefront and any practical responses, even those proposed by Herzl himself, had long since been forgotten. Arendt distinguishes between two types of modern Zionists: socialists and nationalists. According to Arendt, the socialist Zionists cared only to create a classless society of Jews in Palestine; “beyond that they had no national aspiration.” They were only interested in the social aspects of the new state. The nationalist Zionists, on the other hand, thought of nothing but the potential foreign policy of the new state and what its relationship would be with anti-Semitic nations. Arendt is quick to point out the peculiarities of such single-minded focus on both sides as socialist Zionists emerged to fight nationalist oppression and nationalist Zionists found their

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<sup>26</sup>*Origins*, 120. This is in fact Arendt’s last sentence to her “Anti-Semitism” section of *Origins*, a perfect summation of her thought on the subject.

identity because of social discrimination.<sup>27</sup> Nationalist Zionists were for the most part assimilated intellectuals, like Herzl, who could find no place “in the house of their fathers.” There was simply no need for them in the network of international Judaism. They were too assimilated into Christian culture to find a proper place among their Jewish neighbors. They had long since abandoned the mystical superstitions of the Jewish masses and did not have the connections into the business and family ties of the upper class Jews. They were writers, teachers, and scientists who depended on either Christian or secular culture to support them professionally. Jewish culture never secularized itself enough to independently support and maintain such pursuits. Jewish intellectuals had no place socially in international Judaism and no place politically in anti-Semitic nations. Zionism then became

a solution to these men who were more assimilated than any other class of Jewry and certainly more imbued with European education and cultural values than their opponents...In sharp contrast to their eastern comrades [socialist Zionists], these western Zionists were no revolutionaries at all; they neither criticized nor rebelled against the social and political conditions of their time; on the contrary they wanted only to establish the same set of conditions for their own people.<sup>28</sup>

Herzl felt this way because of his conviction that anti-Semitism truly made Judaism what it was. Anti-Semitism had always existed and it would continue to exist as long as there were Jews. Herzl’s definition of Judaism

Presupposes the eternity of anti-Semitism in an eternal world of nations, and moreover, denies the Jews part of responsibility for existing conditions. Thereby it not only cuts off Jewish history from European history and even from the rest of mankind; it ignores the role that European Jewry played in the construction and functioning of the national state; and thus it is reduced to the assumptions, as arbitrary as it is absurd,

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<sup>27</sup> *The Jew as Pariah*, 137

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146

that every Gentile living with Jews must become a conscious or sub-conscious Jew-hater.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, Jewish political action can only take place in the unchanging structure of reality.<sup>30</sup>

Herzl's escape from society into his own nation mirrors the response of the pariah as a dreamer, and both ways are closed in the modern world. Ron Feldman writes in his introduction to *The Jew as Pariah*, "Herzl's Jewish State did not solve 'the Jewish question'...with sovereignty, the pariah people have not ceased to be a pariah—it has created a pariah state."<sup>31</sup> Arendt argues that Zion is no longer a dream or a fantasy world, but a real place with real problems, real Jews and real Arabs, and should be treated as such.

#### A New Kind of Society

Arendt's picture of society as "high society" forms the basis of her critique in *Rahel Varnhagen* and *The Jew as Pariah*. High society seduces the parvenu into a life of "ape-like conformity" that ultimately destroys him and all those around him. On the other end, dreamers and poets only wish to run away from the overwhelming force of high society. They form illusionary worlds where social difference disappears in the face of natural equality. High society is not dealt with in any real way, only side-stepped and pretended not to exist. Or it is re-created in the dreamer's image, such as the salon society's attempt to remake high society in Berlin. Only conscious political action, "the pariah as a rebel," truly confronted the problems of high society. But as Arendt showed with her critique of Herzl, even within Zionism political action could be tainted with the dreams of a natural order and utopian ideologies.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 147

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 171

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 39

What started in *Rahel Varnhagen* as attempts to explain Jewish assimilation and high society became much more when Arendt realized she could use those same concepts to further her understanding of Nazism, totalitarianism, and the Holocaust as well. Thus, while *The Jew as Pariah* was largely a summation of Arendt's conceptual basis in *Rahel Varnhagen*, it was also a preparation for her most ambitious project yet, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). She realized that the path of the conscious pariah had never been a popular choice. If pariahs did not choose conformity and assimilation then they chose escape and denial. Arendt soon began to see the modern world as a result of such behavior. What happens when the dreamer's escape from reality, the suspect's lack of ambition, and the man of good will's naiveté all overtake traditional high society? What happens when they create a new society in their own image? Arendt found the answer in her understanding of a new kind of society unique to the modern world: mass society. Thus, in the New York essays Arendt is beginning to conceptualize her definition of modern society, which may have elements of high society but is also something altogether new. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is also in many ways Arendt's first attempt to explain the origins of modern society.

In *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* Margaret Canovan defines a second "strand of meaning" for society in Arendt's thoughts alongside high society; she calls it the "oikia enlarged."<sup>32</sup> In *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt equates the "rise of society" with "the rise of the 'household' (*oikia*) or of economic activities to the public realm."<sup>33</sup> Arendt uses the Greek term *oikia* to demonstrate the break between ancient and

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<sup>32</sup> Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 105-108

<sup>33</sup> *The Human Condition*, 33

modern “society.” Hannah Fenichel Pitkin writes in her book *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (1998):

Contending that the ancient Greeks located all activities concerned exclusively with survival, the needs of the body, and biological necessity in the household, and noting the derivation of our word “economics” from *oikia*, Arendt claims that for the Greeks economics was private. When, in modern times, it went public, it became the social.<sup>34</sup>

Arendt’s concern with economics is due to the fact that the development of a complex market economy is one the hallmarks of modern society.<sup>35</sup> The mindset of the modern capitalist system pervaded all areas of society and politics. It was accompanied by a complete social restructuring where high society gave way to “mass society.” Mass society was something completely new. For Arendt the emergence of mass society was such a pivotal event for the modern world that in her later works she tends to identify “society” and “the social” solely as mass society. When she speaks of the emergence of the social realm as a “relatively new phenomenon” she really means the emergence of mass society.<sup>36</sup> Mass society, however, is not the same as “the *oikia* enlarged,” because that would imply that mass society is simply the private realm writ large, and such is not the case. The social is “neither private nor public,” but instead “a curious hybrid realm.”<sup>37</sup> This is why in her book *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (1996)

Seyla Benhabib creates “mass society” as a third concept for society in Arendt’s

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<sup>34</sup> Pitkin, 11

<sup>35</sup> Arendt may sound Marxist in this instance, with her insistence on the impact of the material world on the social world, but she would definitely not identify herself as a wholesale Marxist. Arendt was known for her eclectic approach, where she borrowed from many thinkers without getting stuck in the orthodoxy of their tradition. Seyla Benhabib writes that Arendt “criticizes but does not dismiss” Marx. (*Reluctant Modernism* p. xxv). Arendt sympathized with Marx’s idea of labor as one of the central elements of modern history (See *The Human Condition*), and she felt the same need for action as he had. But she did not agree with how deterministic his thought ends up, especially with regard to the inevitability of the proletariat revolution. Arendt thought this determinism allowed Soviet Communism to twist his ideas into a form of totalitarianism.

<sup>36</sup> Pitkin, 10; *The Human Condition*, 23, 27, 28

<sup>37</sup> Pitkin, 15; *The Human Condition*, 35

thoughts, differentiating it from the “sociability” of high society and the purely economic “*oikia* enlarged.”<sup>38</sup>

Arendt’s shift towards economics and mass society is obvious in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but she still only uses them with respect to the “Jewish question.” Thus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* serves as a mid-point in Arendt’s thinking between her later works that focus almost exclusively on mass society and her earlier works where she concerns herself with the culture of high society. Arendt begins her study with an analysis of anti-Semitism as social phenomenon, while still noting its political implications in the modern world. She then moves on to the effects of such thinking in the economic realm, her first hint of analyzing society as mass society. And finally, she reveals the deadly possible consequences that ensue when mass society supplants high society, when everyone is potentially as “superfluous” as the next person.

According to Arendt, one of the greatest problems in Jewish history has been that the Jews “always had to pay with political misery for social glory and with social insult for political success.”<sup>39</sup> This was so because the Jews occupied a unique position in between the state and society. According to Arendt, Jews early modern Europe, specifically “court Jews” and international financiers, were instrumental in the rise of absolute monarchies and the nations-states that followed. She argues, “Jews were the only part of the population willing to finance the state’s beginning and to tie their destinies to its further development.”<sup>40</sup> The Jews were the only class that owed their existence to the state, and like the state, they stood apart from society. Therefore, their special position in the state not only prevented them from immersing themselves into the

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<sup>38</sup> *Reluctant Modernism*, 23-30

<sup>39</sup> *Origins*, 54-56

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 17



existing class system, but also kept them from forming their own class as well.

Furthermore, Arendt contends, “each class of society which came into a conflict with the state as such became anti-Semitic because the only social group which seemed to represent the state were the Jews.”<sup>41</sup> Ron Feldman writes:

Precisely because they were neither part of class society nor the state’s politically active governing clique, the Jews were oblivious to the increasing tension between state and society at the same time they were driven towards the center of the conflict because they stood between the two as part of neither. Politically naïve enough to believe that their true lack of interest in power would be seen and accepted for what it was, they were taken completely by surprise when twentieth-century political anti-Semitism rose to power on the basis of charges of a Jewish world conspiracy.<sup>42</sup>

During the Enlightenment, however, the political avoidance of the Jews was rewarded with social acceptance. Assimilated Jews, who were accepted into high society as exceptional Jews, represented a kind of achievement that the lower classes found extremely enviable. Arendt writes, “Jews became the symbols of Society as such [high society] and the objects of hatred for all those whom society did not accept.”<sup>43</sup> Hated for being a part of the state and the same time not a part of it, for being part of society and at the same time not a part of it, it is no wonder that an escapist mentality pervaded Jewish thought from the salon culture to Herzl’s *Jewish State*. With such a mentality Jewishness and anti-Semitism became natural phenomena, outside the control of any reasonable political action. Treating them as natural was a social tendency, meant to deal with social discrimination, and not political reality. As a result, “society now not only defines some people as pariahs and then seduces them into becoming parvenus, but it also disguises

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>42</sup> *The Jew as Pariah*, 25

<sup>43</sup> *Origins*, 53

this activity as a natural inevitable process beyond human power.”<sup>44</sup> A society detached from reality where everything is placed into a natural order of things and everything is a “process” is Arendt’s next step towards totalitarianism.

Next in *Origins* Arendt turned her attention to the “supposedly permanent process” of economic expansion. Imperialism, as Arendt saw it, made expansion the supreme and permanent aim of politics.<sup>45</sup> Yet, endless growth is not really a political principle at all, and eventually it proves disastrous for politics, because society (the nation) and politics (the state) do not co-operate with one another, but are essentially opposites. Arendt writes:

The secret conflict between state and nation came to light at the very birth of the modern nation-state, when the French Revolution combined the declaration of the Rights of Man with the demand for national sovereignty. The same essential rights were at once claimed as the inalienable heritage of all human beings and as the specific heritage of specific nations, the same nation was at once declared to be subject to laws, which supposedly would flow from the Rights of Man, and sovereign, that is, bound by no universal law and acknowledging nothing superior to itself.<sup>46</sup>

The fight between society and politics then becomes an open “struggle for power,” with politics being subsumed to the ends of society. Arendt argues that for imperialism the key end of society is never-ending expansion, which is detrimental to politics.

Power became the essence of political action and the center of political thought when it was separated from the political community which it should serve. This, it is true, was brought about by an economic factor. But the resulting introduction of power as the content of politics, and of expansion as its only aim, would hardly have met with such universal applause, nor would the resulting dissolution of the nation’s body politic have met with so little opposition, had it not so perfectly answered the hidden desires and secret convictions of the economically and socially dominant classes. The bourgeoisie, so long excluded from government by the nation-state and by their own lack of interest in public affairs, was

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<sup>44</sup> Pitkin, 72

<sup>45</sup> *Origins*, 125

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 230

politically emancipated by imperialism. Imperialism must be considered the first stage in the political rule of the bourgeoisie rather than the last stage of capitalism.<sup>47</sup>

Bourgeois society is definitely Arendt's target here. With its emphasis on economics, natural order, and natural processes, bourgeoisie society took the idea of an escape and gave it political significance.

In a chapter entitled "The End of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man" Arendt criticizes the Enlightenment conception of the abstract human being "who seemed to exist nowhere" except in thought. She argues not for inalienable rights as humans, but for concrete rights as citizens, "the right to have rights." She argues that more than just life and liberty, people need a "political community" in which to actively engage their rights. The problem with modern pariahs as refugees and stateless people "is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed but that nobody wants even to oppress them."<sup>48</sup> It is here that they become completely "superfluous" not only to society and economics, but to politics as well.

Not the loss of specific rights, but the loss of a community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever has befallen ever-increasing numbers of people. Man, it turns out, can lose all the so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. *Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity...* The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships except that they were still human. *The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human.* (emp. added)<sup>49</sup>

As social beings we are not equal because of wealth, rank and status, but even as abstract human beings we are not actually equal, because the abstract man is a phantom concept

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 138

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 296-296

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 297, 299-300

that exists nowhere in reality. We become equal through political participation and a *mutual* decision to guarantee rights to each other, to “build a common world,” a political community.<sup>50</sup> The nation-state for Arendt only promoted a false sense of equality and homogeneity. As Richard Bernstein notes, “When this happens society triumphs over, and obliterates, the very possibility of politics.”<sup>51</sup> Hence, Arendt’s insistence on the separation between the two.

Arendt argues that totalitarianism was unique in its attempts to make men completely superfluous. Nowhere was this more evident than in the concentration camps, where people were stripped of all their humanity, all possibility for meaningful action, and reduced to “a bundle of reactions.” Arendt labeled this kind of treatment as “radical evil.” In a letter to Karl Jaspers Arendt wrote:

What radical evil is I don’t really know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings superfluous (not using them as means to an end, which leaves their essence as humans untouched and impinges only on their human dignity; rather making them superfluous as human beings). This happens as soon as all unpredictability—which, in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity—is eliminated. And all this in turn arises from—or, better, goes along with—the delusion of the omnipotence (not simply with the lust for power) of an individual man. *If an individual man qua man were omnipotent then there is in fact no reason why men in the plural should exist at all.* (emp. added)<sup>52</sup>

Radical evil seeks superfluity; totalitarianism seeks superfluity. It begins with the pariah as an outcast, a socially superfluous person who either has to assimilate to the point of self-destruction or remain outside of society, superfluous to anything going on within it.

Next, with the rise of imperialism entire groups of people become economically

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<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of Arendt’s dialectic on equality and difference see *Reluctant Modernism* p. xxv-xxvii

<sup>51</sup> Bernstein, 86

<sup>52</sup> Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondences: 1926-1969*, ed. by Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. by Robert Kimber and Rita Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 166.

superfluous, whose only value is as surplus labor or surplus capital. Arendt notes the usefulness of race-thinking for imperialism because it creates an entire class of socially superfluous people to be exploited as economically superfluous. Finally, in totalitarianism all traces of humanity are eliminated, as groups of people are denied their right to even have rights, and placed in concentration camps where unthinkable conditions eliminate spontaneity altogether. Still, Arendt did not believe in the inevitability of totalitarianism. She talks about past events “crystallizing” into present phenomena.<sup>53</sup> It is an instantaneous act that occurs only within the fleeting present. Only when the event has come and gone, does it illuminate its own origins. She adamantly believed that an event cannot be pre-determined by inalienable truths, or deterministic laws. Up to the last second, “there was always the real political possibility of preventing its [totalitarianism’s] emergence.”<sup>54</sup> That is why Arendt argues against an emphasis on natural law; it disregards any hope of change and the hope for genuine political action to actually make a difference in the world.

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<sup>53</sup> For a further discussion of Arendt’s concept of crystallization see *Reluctant Modernism* p. 65-66

<sup>54</sup> Bernstein, 54

### CHAPTER 3 THE CASE OF HUMAN PLURALITY

Arendt's arguments in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* were generally well-received, but a common criticism was that the book noticeably centered on the development of Nazi totalitarianism, with Stalinism added only as an afterthought. To correct this problem Arendt decided her next project would be to explore the role of Marxist ideologies in the development of totalitarianism. During the next several years, roughly 1952-1956, all of Arendt's writings—her lectures, articles, and various essays—were organized towards this end. She planned to gather them all together in a single book, which she gave the tentative title of "Totalitarian Elements of Marxism."<sup>1</sup> Yet despite forming a detailed outline and submitting applications for grants on the premise that book was going to be written, Arendt never actually took the final step to organize her arguments into a book-length discussion fit for publication. Instead, she decided to hold onto her various writings and funnel them into her next three books, which came out in rapid succession over the course of only four years: *The Human Condition* (1958), *Between Past and Future* (1961), and *On Revolution* (1962).

Arendt chose to do this for several reasons. First of all, shortly after beginning her analysis she realized that an examination of Marx, because of his importance, meant nothing less than an examination of the entire tradition of political thought itself. Thus, her "little study of Marx" very quickly grew beyond the scope of a single book.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, Arendt was distracted by current events not only in America, but also in Europe and Israel. In America, Arendt and her husband became increasingly nervous as

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<sup>1</sup> Young-Bruehl, 276-277. Also see Chapter 3 of Canovan, Margaret. *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 63-98

<sup>2</sup> Young-Bruehl, 279

McCarthyism took center stage. This was cause for alarm because neither of them were full-fledged citizens. During this time, Arendt's immediate concern over the campaign to "make America more American" permeated her writings more than the abstract intellectualism it would take to fully engage Marx. Nevertheless, the obvious anti-communist and anti-Stalinist overtones of this new Americanism still put Marx at the center of much of her discussion. But until Arendt and her husband finally received their citizenship in August of 1952, the two of them "lived in fear."<sup>3</sup> When it seemed that Arendt might actually have to time to write her book, events in Europe once again diverted her attention. The growing influence of French existentialism prompted her to write "Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought" (1954), in which she commends the French existentialists for their revolutionary spirit and reaction against traditional philosophy, but chides them for their adaptation of Marx simply to "argue themselves out of the impasse of nihilism;" something, she argues, they had created themselves.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, developments in Russia made it difficult for Arendt to make definitive statements about the effect of Marx on the political structure. With Stalin's death in March of 1953, no one was quite sure, Arendt included, what would happen next. Then, in 1956, after Khrushchev gave his famous de-Stalinization speech, a series of revolutions threatened Russia's hold over the Eastern Bloc. Of these revolutions Arendt was most intrigued by the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. It left a massive imprint on her thinking, as we will see later in this chapter. Finally, in Israel, many of the problems Arendt warned about in her New York essays did indeed come to light. And although Arendt focused most of her intellectual energy on America and Europe, she

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 275

<sup>4</sup> "Concern with Politics" in *Essays on Understanding*, 438-439; Also see Young-Bruehl, 281-282.

could not help but notice the connection between European and Israeli nationalism when, in 1952 with the Nationality Acts, Israel managed to exclude all but about 10 percent of the Arab population from full citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

Arendt originally planned her study of Marxism in three parts, which, though altered in many ways, reflect the themes she argues in *The Human Condition*, *Between Past and Future* and *On Revolution*.<sup>6</sup> The first part was meant to be an analysis of Marx's concept of man as a "working animal" and his elevation of labor as the highest human capacity. Arendt kept this theme in *The Human Condition*, in which she continually draws upon and critiques Marx to make her argument. Still, *The Human Condition* is much less about Marx himself than Arendt's own concepts of labor, work and action. Arendt's lectures from Princeton in 1953 entitled "Karl Marx and the Great Tradition," which were meant to form the second part of her book, found their way into *Between Past and Future*, whose central theme is the impact of the tradition of political thought on modern politics and history. Of the three books *On Revolution* diverged most from its original topic. Arendt originally wanted the third section of her Marxism book to explain how "the specifically totalitarian elements in Marxism are fully realized when both the interest of the working class and the cause of the revolution are abandoned for the sake of the global realization of an ideology."<sup>7</sup> Most of this argument found its way back into *The Origins of Totalitarianism* instead, in an essay entitled "Ideology and Terror," which Arendt added to the 1958 enlarged edition. *On Revolution* turned out mostly as the product of a lecture given at Princeton in 1959, which focused on the French Revolution as a negative example of revolution and the American and Hungarian

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<sup>5</sup> Young-Bruehl, 291

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 277, 279

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 277



Revolutions as positive examples. Although Marx is present in the discussion, he is by no means the centerpiece.

### The Human Condition

One of the most common characterizations of *The Human Condition* is Arendt's nostalgia for the Greek *polis*, which can indeed be found with little stress. Some scholars however, place this nostalgia at the center of Arendt's entire way of thinking, labeling her as an "anti-modern" philosopher who suffers from "polis-envy."<sup>8</sup> One of the reasons Arendt receives this label is because *The Human Condition* is often seen as the most definitive expression of her political philosophy. During her lifetime, in fact, this was the label she most often received, even by such influential thinkers as Isaiah Berlin.<sup>9</sup> It wasn't until after Arendt's death that scholars began to go back and look for other motivations for her thought. The first to do so was Ron Feldman in his introduction to *The Jew as Pariah* in 1978. He writes:

There is an organic link between her conception of Jewish history and her political theory: her view of the modern Jewish condition serves as an introduction to her political theory, while her political theory illuminates her interpretation of Jewish history.<sup>10</sup>

Feldman argues that Arendt's ideal of the conscious pariah drove all her thinking on the effects of assimilation and conformity in politics, which played a key role in her understanding of totalitarianism. Though largely overlooked, Feldman marked the beginning of shift towards understanding Arendt in terms of her Jewish identity and her reaction to totalitarianism as a Jew. According the Seyla Benhabib, the first challenge to the reigning notion of Arendt's Grecophilia came from Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's

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<sup>8</sup> Wolin, 69

<sup>9</sup> For Berlin's reaction to *The Human Condition* see Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism* p. xxv, f. 6

<sup>10</sup> *The Jew as Pariah*, 17

influential biography, *For Love of the World* (1982). Arendt's personal involvement in Jewish politics, as well her intense reflection on the events of the twentieth century, showed Young-Bruehl that Arendt's primary motivation for her thought came from her experiences with totalitarianism. However, while Young-Bruehl's argument holds up biographically, she leaves its theoretical implications largely unanswered. Thus, philosophically, Arendt was still identified by the pro-Homeric, anti-modern theme of *The Human Condition*. Margaret Canovan's *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (1992) was the first attempt to explore the theoretical implications of Young-Bruehl's argument. Canovan wants to dismantle the notion that *The Human Condition* somehow stands alone from all of Arendt's previous works. Using the proposed "Totalitarian Element in Marxism" discussed by Young-Bruehl, Canovan argues, "Not only is *The Human Condition* itself much more closely related to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* than it appears to be, but virtually the entire agenda of Arendt's political thought was set by her reflections on the political catastrophes of the mid-century."<sup>11</sup> She argues Arendt's theory of action was rooted much more in her response to totalitarianism than in her nostalgia for the Greek *polis*. Even so, Canovan argues that *Origins* should not take the place of *The Human Condition* as Arendt's *magnum opus*. She is adamant about the fact that there is no one single publication that can be regarded as the definitive statement of Arendt's political thought.<sup>12</sup> Despite Canovan's warning, Arendtian scholarship today is largely divided into two camps: those who place *Origins* and Arendt's Jewish identity at the center of her thought and those

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<sup>11</sup> Canovan, *A Reinterpretation*, 7

<sup>12</sup> Gordon J. Tolle, "Arendt's Anti-Foundationalism," review of *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, by Margaret Canovan, *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 1994): 378-379; Also see Canovan, *A Reinterpretation*, 99-101

who remain convinced that *The Human Condition* weighs more on the political implications of Arendt's thought than anything preceded it. Even those who want to replace the image of Arendt as simply an anti-modernist lover of the Greek polis, like Seyla Benhabib, have to conclude that in Arendt's thought, "It is the capacity for speech and action that creates and sustains the political."<sup>13</sup> The similarity to the Homeric exaltation of "words and deeds" is hard to deny.

Arendt's arguments in *The Human Condition* originate from the philosophical dualism between the two modes of human activity. The first mode is called the *vita activa* and encompasses all the activities of the body. The second mode is the *vita contemplativa* and encompasses all the activities of the mind. If the *vita activa* is characterized by action, then the *vita contemplativa* is characterized by inaction. In other words, the two modes can be simplified as the dichotomy of thought versus action. In *The Human Condition* Arendt wants to explain the condition of the *vita activa*—divided into labor, work, and action—in the modern world. But in order to do so, she has to first explain the relationship between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* in the ancient world. In the pre-Socratic polis, thought was secondary to speech and action. Homer praises Achilles as "the doer of great deeds and the speaker of great words." Within the *vita activa* speech and action stood as the highest capacities of man. The lowest action was the labor of the slave followed by the work of the craftsman. What made these activities inferior to speech and action is that they were subject to necessity. The necessities of life, for the Homeric Greeks, were private activities by nature, occurring solely within the realm of the household. To create a public realm, where action could truly be free, it could not be tainted by necessity, because necessary action is, by

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<sup>13</sup> Benhabib, xxix

definition, not free. Thus, the *polis* was the only place man could reach his highest potential as man. Inherent in this idea was the Greek conception of immortality. The gods were immortal; nature was immortal. Man, on the other hand, was defined by his very mortality in an immortal world. The only way man could overcome this mortality was to be remembered forever, namely through the greatness of his “words and deeds.” Such greatness, however, cannot be achieved if man is subject to necessity. He must be free to act as he chooses, and not as he is forced to do.<sup>14</sup>

The supremacy of the *vita activa* first came under attack when Plato and Aristotle claimed that action was not the highest capacity of man and that being remembered was not his ultimate goal. They argued that it was man’s capacity for reason that set him apart from nature and the lower animals. Through reason man could discover the order of things in the world around him and be given a glimpse of the divine. Arendt contrasts this to the idea of immortality by calling it eternity. The highest end of the *vita contemplativa* was to enlighten oneself with a glimpse of the eternal. Whether it was eternal Beauty or Goodness, or later an eternal God, it was the idea of a Being outside of time, transcendent to time. Immortality is ever-lasting life within time, eternity goes beyond it.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Plato and Aristotle began a tradition of political thought that placed thought (*vita contemplativa*) above any kind of action (*vita activa*). Arendt argues this tradition lasted into the modern era, until Marx finally turned it back on its head, placing action over thought once again. Arendt argues, however, Marx also reversed the hierarchy within the *vita activa*, so that pure action was no longer the highest activity but the lowest. Labor, once the lowest of all human activities, suddenly became the highest

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<sup>14</sup> *The Human Condition*, 7-21

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-21

and most human action of all. With the victory of labor in the modern world, Arendt believes that man lost both his Socratic eternity *and* his Homeric immortality.<sup>16</sup> The majority of *The Human Condition* is devoted to explain how this happened.

The pre-Socratic *polis* was identified by its sharp distinction between private and public. The modern world, instead, is defined by the combination of both private and public into a new realm, the social realm. This differs from the Greek *polis* because Arendt argues that the modern social realm excludes the possibility for action. Instead, it “expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.”<sup>17</sup> Arendt returns to the salon society to explain the reaction against such conformism. Once again the ideas of Rousseau are at the center of her critique. According to Arendt, Rousseau wanted to save the individual from “society’s unbearable perversion of the human heart.” He wanted to create a new kind of intimacy, which ultimately meant an individual isolated from the rigors of society and known to himself only through introspection. Like Arendt’s “dreamer” in her New York essays, Rousseau believed only an escape from society could save the individual from complete assimilation.<sup>18</sup> But for Arendt, this did not do away with the idea of conformism in society. Instead, it only reinforced conformity by acknowledging all public conditions could be the same for everyone as long there was a private, “intimate,” place left for the individual to escape into, where he could reside with all his differences. Arendt writes, “The victory of equality in the modern world is only

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 55-56

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 40

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that just as Rahel Varnhagen thought of herself as “just Rahel” and nothing else, so to does Arendt mention in *The Human Condition* (p. 39) “it was as though Jean-Jacques rebelled against a man called Rousseau.”

the political and legal recognition that society has conquered the public realm, and that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual.”<sup>19</sup> Arendt is quick to point out that in the *polis* it was the public realm, and not the private, where expressions of individuality took place.

A central theme in *The Human Condition* is Arendt’s analysis of the concept of ownership. The modern emphasis on the private character of individuality was followed closely by the idea of private ownership. If the individual indeed has no place in the public realm then ownership can be a strictly private matter, because the first and most basic idea of ownership is that the individual owns his own person, and it is something he can share with no one. From the idea of ownership came the ideas of property and accumulation of wealth, attributed to John Locke and Adam Smith respectively. If the private individual can indeed own himself, then he can own almost anything attached to his private person. Furthermore, it is this ownership of property that maintains the independence of the individual from the surrounding public realm. The loss of property then goes hand in hand with the loss of individuality.

Arendt argues that the result of such a mentality led to the degradation of action and the exaltation of production, because actions, that is pure actions that leave no product behind and exhaust themselves in the act itself, cannot be owned the same way as products can. Both Locke and Smith judged production by the durability of its products. The more durable a product, the easier it is to own as property (Locke) or exchange for something else (Smith). Arendt calls this activity work because unlike labor, its products are meant to build a lasting world of things in which human interaction can take place. Labor, on the other hand, produces for the sole purpose of consumption. Consumables

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<sup>19</sup> *The Human Condition*, 39-41

by nature have a very short durability. Food, if left unattended will rot and return back to nature within a very short amount of time. The products of work, such as a building or a table, instead last much longer. Thus, in the concept of property and ownership, work became the highest activity in the *vita activa*, followed by labor, which although produced in a very limited capacity, was still more productive than pure action, which produced nothing at all.

Arendt argues that elevating work as the highest activity is detrimental to the public realm for several reasons. First of all, it replaces the idea of acting with the idea of making.<sup>20</sup> Work has a clear beginning and a clear end; it is a process that ends with product itself. Action, on the other hand, is defined by its unpredictability, its unknown end. “The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end.”<sup>21</sup> Making understands things only in their potential use as a means to a desired end. The fabricator, or *homo faber* as Arendt calls him, looks at a tree and sees a table. The tree is a means to an end, which is to produce an object. In this sense, *homo faber* is very destructive of nature, and eventually destructive the public world of things he has built himself. For *homo faber*, once an object enters the world it becomes nothing more than a potential means to another desired end. Despite his best efforts at permanence, *homo faber* achieves the exact opposite because there is nothing that he does not see in terms of its potential use, which ultimately means its destruction. Arendt argues, “As long as we believe that we deal with ends and means in the political realm, we shall not be able to prevent anybody’s using all

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 220-230

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.,233

means to pursue recognized ends.”<sup>22</sup> *Homo faber* confuses utility, “in order to,” with meaningfulness, “for the sake of.” Utility becomes meaningful in itself, and something is meaningful only if it is useful. To combat this assumption Arendt borrows her favorite quote from Lessing, who asked “And what is the use of use?”<sup>23</sup> For Arendt, “The modern age was as intent on excluding political man, that is, man who acts and speaks, from its public realm as antiquity was on excluding *homo faber*.”<sup>24</sup>

Up to this point, although Locke and Smith replaced pure action (or genuine political activity in Arendt’s mind) with productivity, they still held to the supremacy of reason (*vita contemplativa*) over all modes of action (*vita activa*). Man needed reason to discover the purpose of his productive capacities; otherwise they would be pointless and chaotic. Thus, Smith speaks of “enlightened self-interest,” so that man’s individual production and exchange capacities are still guided by his capacity for rational thought. Marx, however, was the first philosopher to argue that man’s productive capacities were indeed his most human qualities, even above his ability to reason. With this idea, Marx reversed the hierarchy of thought and action that stood for over two thousand years. Already inherent in the idea of ownership was the idea that man can own his own private person. Marx simply changed the meaning of that private person. If man truly wanted to own himself, then he needed to own his most basic attribute as a human being, his labor-power. The products of his work could be separated from him, but his labor, because it served the basic necessities of his life, was inexorably tied to his very being. If man was to own himself, then it seemed obvious that the first thing he should own should be his life process. The modern world, as Marx saw it, alienated man from his own life process,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 229

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 154-155; She uses the quote again in *Between Past and Future* (p. 80) to make a similar argument.

<sup>24</sup> *The Human Condition*, 159



because he was not allowed to own his own labor power. Thus, modern man was in essence alienated from himself. Marx's solution was to do away with private property altogether. Taking Locke and Smith to their logical extreme, Marx concluded that the *only* thing man should own should be himself, meaning the essential definition of himself, his labor-power. The problem Arendt had with the elevation of labor as the highest human capacity was that it made necessary the quintessential question of the public realm. Necessity by definition was a private matter in the ancient world. Since necessity was now public, Marx concluded that the only way to eliminate necessity was to eliminate the public realm altogether.

With both labor and work being ultimately destructive of the public realm, Arendt makes the case for pure action as our fundamental public activity as humans. If the necessities of life condition the activity of labor, and the production of things (which Arendt calls worldliness) condition work, then the fact that we share a common world with each other, that we exist as a plurality, conditions our speech and action. Arendt writes, "with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world...this insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work."<sup>25</sup> For Arendt, the connection between speech and action is inseparable.

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 at the same time he is the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 176-177

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 178-179

In defining *who* we are, rather than *what* we are, speech and action are about being with others, in “sheer human togetherness,” which is neither for nor against each other.<sup>27</sup>

Action, unlike work and labor, cannot take place in isolation, and thus must maintain a public realm in which to act. The political realm is then created as men act together in the public realm. For Arendt, the *polis* was not the city-state itself, but the in-between space in which people spoke and acted towards one another.<sup>28</sup> That in-between space is the public realm.

### Between Past and Future

Arendt continues her critique of the tradition of political thought in *Between Past and Future*. As she explained in *The Human Condition*, many of the problems of the modern world arose from the substitution of making for acting. Arendt continues this line of thinking in *Between Past and Future* by arguing that such an idea was actually part of the tradition of political thought long before Locke and Smith made it the center of their arguments. In fact, it lay at the very core of the tradition because Plato, with whom the tradition began, gave preference to all actions that have perceivable or even natural ends. This was a definitive break from the Homeric tradition that emphasized action whose ends could never be known precisely because of the unpredictable nature of action. Arendt clearly favors the latter, because for her, Homeric action was indeed free action. Jerome Kohn writes in his introduction:

The Greek experience, which she finds disclosed in the works of Homer, Sophocles, and Thucydides, none of whom was a philosopher, is of *freedom*, of not being bound to or by anything, of imitating utterly new things for which no patterns exist, things that would never appear in the world “naturally,” that is through the ever-recurring processes of nature. But when Aristotle, following and somehow completing Plato’s thought,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 178-180

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 182-183, 195

said that if nature were to build a house it would do so as we do—first growing the foundation, next the walls, and then the roof—the implication is that human agency imitates natural processes and, more important, that human action is a kind of craft, a technique of “making.” It is the conception of action as making that commenced the tradition of political thought.<sup>29</sup>

This is the fundamental reason why Arendt rejects the tradition of political philosophy outright, and claims not to be a philosopher herself. Yet, Arendt did not think she was the one ending the tradition. Instead it had ended a century earlier “when a philosopher turned away from philosophy so as to ‘realize’ it in politics.”<sup>30</sup> That philosopher was Marx. Again, Arendt is referring back to her arguments in *The Human Condition*, where she explains Marx’s reversal of the hierarchy between thought and action, as well as the ultimate substitution of labor not only for work but for pure action as well. The end of the tradition is important for Arendt because it reveals the problems inherent in the tradition itself. She explains, “The elementary problems of politics never come as clearly to light in their immediate and simple urgency as when they are first formulated and when they receive their final challenge.”<sup>31</sup> Arendt is clear to point out, however, that Marx still thought in terms of the tradition began by Plato and Aristotle, but whereas they thought the state should escape necessity at all costs<sup>32</sup>, Marx thought it was precisely the job of state to confront necessity, and ultimately eliminate it. With necessity eliminated, the need for the state would vanish as well.

In a section titled “What is Freedom,” Arendt explicitly connects her ideas of action and politics to the idea of freedom. Similar to her distinction between the *vita*

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<sup>29</sup> Jerome Kohn. Introduction to *Between Past and Future*, ix

<sup>30</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 17

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18

<sup>32</sup> Despite reversing the Homeric hierarchy of action over thought, Plato and Aristotle did not stray from the idea that the necessities of life should be restricted to the private realm. The emergence of necessity into the public world is an entirely modern phenomenon.

*activa* and *vita contemplativa*, Arendt differentiates between freedom of thought and freedom of action. “Inner freedom,” she writes, is “the inward space into which men may escape from external coercion and *feel* free. This inner feeling remains without outer manifestations and hence is by definition politically irrelevant.”<sup>33</sup> Inner freedom, “presupposes a retreat from the world...into an inwardness to which no other has access.”<sup>34</sup> Freedom of action, which Arendt equates with the freedom of the *polis*, “needed a common public space...into which each of the free men could insert himself by word and deed.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, “the *raison d’etre* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action.”<sup>36</sup> Action and politics guarantee a public realm in which freedom can appear. Arendt argues, however, “the philosophical tradition is almost unanimous in holding that freedom begins where men have left the realm of political life.”<sup>37</sup> The reigning notion of freedom has always been inner freedom. Action, on the other hand, “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 any particular goal.”<sup>38</sup> “Freedom as related to politics is not a phenomenon of the will.”<sup>39</sup> For Arendt, the equation of a free will with political freedom is one of the most rampant fallacies in the philosophical tradition.<sup>40</sup> Echoing the arguments in her final work *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt argues that a free will alone is not sufficient for political freedom, because the will is part of the *vita contemplativa*, and as such can only conceive of freedom as inner freedom.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 145

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 147

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 145

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 155

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 150

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 156

In modern times, she argues, the gap between freedom and politics grew even larger when political thinkers equated freedom with sovereignty. Returning to her favorite target, Arendt identifies Rousseau as the “most consistent representative of the theory of sovereignty, which he derived directly from the will, so that he could conceive of political power in the strict image of individual will-power.”<sup>41</sup> The consequence of such thinking for Rousseau was that “he held that in an ideal state ‘the citizens had no communications one with another,’ and that in order to avoid factions ‘each citizen should think only his own thoughts.’” This meant a state rooted not in human plurality, but instead one rooted in “extreme individualism.”<sup>42</sup> In one of her most stinging criticisms of Rousseau she writes, “A state...in which there is no communication between the citizens and where each man thinks only his own thoughts is by definition a tyranny.”<sup>43</sup>

In an essay entitled “Arendt, Rousseau, and Human Plurality in Politics” (1983) Margaret Canovan argues Arendt’s distaste for Rousseau resulted from the fact that

The two offered fundamentally different solutions to the problem of human plurality in politics. Whereas Rousseau tried to unite the citizens under a single General Will, Arendt stressed the importance of a common public world within which plural citizens can be contained.<sup>44</sup>

Yet Canovan argues, despite their virtually opposite conclusions on plurality, both Arendt and Rousseau were “strikingly similar” thinkers and shared “a good deal in common.”<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps that is why Rousseau appears as a target in almost all of Arendt’s major works.

Theoretical difference is magnified at its greatest when two thinkers can agree on many

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 162

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 161-162

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Canovan, “Arendt, Rousseau, and Human Plurality in Politics” *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (May 1983), 286.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 286-287

different things except a few key points, in which they arrive at completely opposite conclusions. Arendt's concept of action is rooted in her concept of novelty, meaning one of action's most admirable characteristics is its ability to create something new. She continually stresses the Augustinian idea "that there be a beginning, man was created, before whom there was nobody."<sup>46</sup> Canovan argues that such an emphasis on beginnings naturally led Arendt to engage the social contract thinkers, with Rousseau being at the forefront of such thinking. Canovan labels Rousseau and Arendt as "participationists," meaning both eschewed representative politics for "face-to-face involvement by the ordinary citizen."<sup>47</sup> Rousseau's ideas led to new ideas in popular sovereignty, and Arendt of course thought genuine political action was the essence of freedom. Furthermore, neither Arendt nor Rousseau believed that inevitable historical processes controlled politics; both believed in the possibility of cooperative human action. Along this line, Canovan contends that at the heart of Rousseau's *Social Contract* lies the idea that the political realm and political justice are not the outcome of natural law, but instead, are brought about by man-made rules. For both Rousseau and Arendt, politics is the result of human action. Human action both creates and maintains the political realm; "Citizens must invent rules of justice for themselves."<sup>48</sup> Where the two differed is in their respective solutions to the problem of how this action should be structured. Rousseau conceived of the notion of a General Will, in which all the conflicting wills of the people as private individuals were combined into a single will as public citizens. Arendt found this idea atrocious because it flew in the face of all her ideas about the dangers of assimilation and social conformity. As stated earlier, Arendt believed that Rousseau did

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<sup>46</sup> *The Human Condition*, 177

<sup>47</sup> Canovan, "Arendt, Rousseau", 287

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 289

not escape social conformity by replacing it with political equality, as he had hoped, but instead only reified the notion of a homogeneous public, one which destroyed human plurality. Because plurality is the keystone for Arendt's concept of action, and indeed her entire way of thinking about politics, she continually saves her harshest criticisms for Rousseau.

### On Revolution

If the French Revolution can be thought of as an extension of the Enlightenment, a realization, or at least a consequence of its ideals, then quite possibly Arendt's most vehement attack on the Enlightenment comes in *On Revolution* (1962), where she accuses the French Revolution of being the harbinger for the modern notion of the nation-state. Arendt's greatest critique of the French Revolution was that it brought the idea of necessity into the realm of politics. This was followed philosophically by Hegel's, and then Marx's, notion of historical necessity, which is precisely the kind of political thought that gave birth to totalitarianism. In the French Revolution the idea of necessity came in the form of "The Social Question." For Arendt, the social question was the existence of poverty, with poverty being the ultimate condition of necessity. Arendt argued that all the subsequent problems arising from the French Revolution were due to the fact that the inherently anti-political phenomenon of necessity had not only worked its way into politics, but came to be the very definition of politics. When the French poor crashed onto the scene of the Revolution, driven by their bodily needs, they brought the idea of necessity with them. From then on economic factors were transformed into political factors and explained into political terms.<sup>49</sup> The American Revolution

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<sup>49</sup> Peasant revolts were of course nothing new, but for the first time the idea of necessity became intertwined with both philosophical and political notions of freedom.

succeeded precisely because it was not driven by the question of poverty, but instead by the right for free political action.<sup>50</sup> For Arendt, this was an exception to the rule, because in Europe the question of poverty was the center of every revolution for nearly a hundred and fifty years, until the Hungarian Revolution finally broke the pattern in 1956. It was not just the poor who brought the idea of necessity with them to the political realm, but the entire Revolution eventually shifted to center itself on fulfilling the burdens of necessity. Robespierre abandoned his notion that freedom should be preserved at all costs and replaced it with the idea that necessity should be serviced at all costs. Suddenly, “the most sacred of all laws” became “the welfare of the people.” Arendt then argues that, “It was necessity, the urgent needs of the people, that unleashed the terror and sent the Revolution to its doom.”<sup>51</sup> As seen in her analysis in *Origins*, Arendt was already very critical of the Rights of the Man. In *On Revolution* she takes her critique a step further when she realizes that the French Revolution not only exalted the Rights of Man but ultimately transformed them into the “Rights of the Sans-Culottes.” The most basic Right of Man became freedom from necessity, and this freedom was not meant to be a basic social right, but a basic political right instead. From then on it was the duty of the state to ensure this right.

Arendt argues such thinking first began with a fundamental shift from the idea of the consent of the people to the idea of the will of the people. The greatest proponent of new idea was once again Rousseau. She writes:

It is obvious that under these circumstances, ancient theory, with its emphasis on the popular consent as a prerequisite of lawful government, could no longer be adequate, and to the wisdom of hindsight it appeared almost a matter of course that Rousseau’s *volunté générale* [general will]

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<sup>50</sup> *On Revolution*, 58

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 50



should have replaced the ancient notion of consent...the very word 'consent', with its overtones of deliberate choice and considered opinion, was replaced with the word 'will', which essentially excludes all processes of exchange of opinions and eventual agreement between them. The will, if it is to function at all, must indeed be one and indivisible.<sup>52</sup>

Here, Rousseau attempts to combine politics and the individual into a single entity guided by a common will. Robespierre echoed this idea crying, "One will is necessary, ONE!"<sup>53</sup>

The state itself became like an isolated individual: subject to necessity, cut off from reality, and unable to comprehend anything outside itself. "While this emotion-laden insensitivity to reality was quite conspicuous already in Rousseau's own behavior, *his fantastic irresponsibility and unreliability*, it became a political factor of importance only with Robespierre, who introduced it into the factional strife of the Revolution. (emp. added)"<sup>54</sup> Arendt compares this to the American Revolution that sought to maintain the plurality of its people. "They knew that the public realm in a republic was constituted by an exchange of opinion between equals, and that this realm would simply disappear the very moment an exchange became superfluous because all equals happened to be of the same opinion."<sup>55</sup> There is an implied argument here in which Arendt, while certainly not alleviating Robespierre of his own guilt, places the burden of the ideas behind the Reign of Terror squarely on the shoulders of Rousseau.<sup>56</sup>

Arendt suggests another reason why the idea of necessity came to the forefront of the French Revolution was the emphasis on combating hypocrisy. Arendt writes "It was

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 66

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 67

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 80

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 83

<sup>56</sup> In addition to Rousseau Arendt also singles out Descartes as an influence for the Reign of Terror. She writes, "It was as though Cartesian doubt...had become the principle of the political realm, and the reason was that Robespierre had performed the same introversion upon the deeds of action that Descartes had performed on the articulations of thought." (*On Revolution*, 88). As we will see in the next chapter Arendt has a similar distaste for Descartes as she does for Rousseau.

the war upon hypocrisy the transformed Robespierre's dictatorship into the Reign of Terror."<sup>57</sup> In addition to the disgust for eighteenth-century high society, personified by the corruption-laden Court at Versailles, Robespierre's war on hypocrisy was also meant as a means for "stripping the mask off the disguised traitor." Concerned with finding genuine appearances in a chaotic time, such thinking eventually led Robespierre and others to conclude that only 'natural man' in his 'original state' was un-hypocritical. In other words, only a man who appears in public driven by his "naked need" cannot be driven by hidden motives, and thus will always appear un-hypocritically. Necessity was the only genuine appearance.<sup>58</sup> Robespierre developed an idealized view of the lower classes as the only truly un-hypocritical group in the Revolution. From that point on, his entire concept of politics was driven by his newfound conception of necessity.

Following in the footsteps of the French Revolution, Hegel and Marx took the idea that necessity was indeed the only genuine appearance and gave it a philosophical restructuring. Hegel used it to develop his concept of historical necessity. Arendt writes, "Theoretically, the most far-reaching consequence of the French Revolution was the birth of the modern concept of history in Hegel's philosophy."<sup>59</sup> Because Hegel argued that Being manifests itself in history, he felt the need to rid history of all its hypocrisy and uncertainty. In doing so he could then discover the pattern of Being in history, which he called the world spirit. In using the idea that necessity defines genuine appearance, Hegel created his laws of historical necessity, which he then tied to a greater Being that works itself out over the course of history.<sup>60</sup> Anything that was once

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 89

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 100

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>60</sup> Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: the Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 67

political—words and deeds—became historical, subject to the laws of historical necessity. Human beings then lose their ability to act in history; they can only observe its laws. After Hegel, Marx took the idea of necessity to its theoretical extreme, which ultimately resulted in the end of the tradition of political thought itself, as we have seen. Despite the fact that Marx still felt necessity created genuine appearance, as can be seen in his insistence on the purity of labor, he still felt that the purpose of the state was to confront necessity and ultimately eliminate it as a public phenomenon. Once such a task was complete then the state could “wither away.” Once Marx made this leap, “the history of modern revolutions seemed to have reached a point of no return.”<sup>61</sup> The Russian Revolution, in Arendt’s eyes, finished everything the French Revolution began. Arendt’s critiques of Marx in *The Human Condition* and *Between Past and Future*, as well as her critique of Marxist ideology in *Origins*, all began with her critique of Marx’s philosophy as the realization of ideals set forth during the French Revolution.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt remarked on the characteristic of novelty in action. Action is defined only by its beginning because, according to Arendt, the end of a truly free action can never be known. An action with a precise end in mind is not free action, but is the means/end mentality of work, of making something. In *On Revolution* Arendt argues that the idea of action as novelty was first realized in politics during the eighteenth-century revolutions, “where man began to be aware that a new beginning could be a political phenomenon, that it could be the result of what men had done and what they could consciously set out to do.”<sup>62</sup> This meant that the “new world order” was not necessarily the design of Providence, but the result of conscious action. It may seem

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<sup>61</sup> *On Revolution*, 51

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 37

odd that for all her criticisms of the French Revolution Arendt actually describes it as one of the first instances in the modern world of men acting into the political realm. This is because she does not have a negative opinion of revolutions themselves. In fact, she argues, they are the best place to find pure action in the modern world. Modern revolutions are defined by their novelty, their emphasis on creating something new. Events such as the American and Hungarian revolutions showed Arendt that revolution in itself could indeed be a re-vitalization of the ancient action ideal, a revolution based on establishing a realm of freedom, a place where true political action could take place. It is no coincidence that Arendt's *On Revolution* came on the footsteps of the Hungarian Revolution; her argument was largely an argument *for* revolution as such. Arendt's distaste for the French Revolution did not develop because it was a revolution (as others such as Burke cried), but because it completely squandered its potential as a revolution. Instead, it created a false revolutionary ideal dominated by necessity that came to influence all notions of revolution for the next one hundred and fifty years.

No revolution has ever solved the 'social question' and liberated men from the predicament of want, but all revolutions, with the exception of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, have followed the example of the French Revolution and used and misused the mighty forces of misery and destitution in their struggle against tyranny and oppression. And although the whole record of past revolutions demonstrates beyond doubt that every attempt to solve the social question with political means, leads into terror, and that it is terror which sends revolutions to their doom, it can hardly be denied that to avoid this fatal mistake is almost impossible when a revolution breaks out under conditions of mass poverty. What has always made it so terribly tempting to follow the French Revolution on its foredoomed path is not only the fact that liberation from necessity, because of its urgency, will always take precedence over the building of freedom, but the even more important and more dangerous fact that the uprising of the poor against the rich carries with it an altogether different momentum of force than a rebellion of the oppressed against their oppressors.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 102

When the Hungarian Revolution broke out based on action and freedom—not necessity—Arendt felt a renewed justification for her entire way of thinking. Arendt's enthusiasm was of course not conditional to the success of the Hungarian Revolution, as it did not last long in the face of overwhelming Soviet force. Instead, she found great encouragement in the fact that revolution itself escaped the shadow of the French Revolution, that revolution based on action and freedom was still possible in the modern world. This gave her a newfound hope for both humanity and politics. The confidence she expresses in her three books following the Hungarian Revolution could very well have been a result of the revolution itself.

CHAPTER 4  
ARENDR, KANT, AND THE SEARCH FOR EICHMANN'S CONSCIENCE

In 1961, while *On Revolution* was getting ready for publication, something happened that forever changed Arendt's image and legacy as a scholar. Israel announced the capture and forthcoming trial of infamous Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. Seeing a once in a lifetime opportunity, Arendt volunteered to go to Jerusalem and serve as a trial reporter for *The New Yorker* magazine. She felt she owed it to herself, not just because of her professional commitment to understanding the totalitarian phenomenon, but also to find closure in her personal life, for her own experiences that still weighed heavy on her mind, even after so many years. Not since *Rahel Varnhagen* had Arendt committed so much of herself to a project. She wanted to know what made Eichmann do the things he did without remorse. If she could get inside his head, then she could begin to understand the complete "moral collapse" of European society that allowed for the destruction of six million Jews. After the trial was over—with Eichmann being convicted and executed—Arendt's reports appeared in *The New Yorker*, and within a few months she published them collectively under the title *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Arendt claimed, contrary to the belief of many others who saw the trial, that Eichmann was not a monster or demon, or even a sadistic killer, but instead an average individual who simply lost the ability "to think and to judge" for himself.<sup>1</sup> Arendt's argument found criticism among Jews and Gentiles alike because of her unwillingness to demonize Eichmann and her outspoken opinion that Jewish Councils aided Eichmann in his deportations. She was labeled as a "self-hating Jewess" and an

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Beiner, "Hannah Arendt on Judging," Interpretive essay to Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992), 100

Eichmann sympathizer who condemned Jews and exonerated Nazis.<sup>2</sup> In the universities a debate raged over the validity of Arendt's argument, and her reputation became tied to her newfound notion of the banality of evil. To understand what Arendt meant by the banality of evil, and Eichmann's loss of thought and judgment, we have to look at her final writings on *The Life of Mind* (1978), where she fully elucidates exactly what she means by "thinking" and "judging."

In *The Human Condition*, *Between Past and Future*, and *On Revolution* Arendt made her case for human plurality on the basis of action and freedom. Yet, with the Eichmann trial, it became apparent that her task was not complete. So much of the philosophical tradition depended on notions of thought and truth. How could she characterize Eichmann as un-thinking when thinking itself was open to so much interpretation? From Plato and Aristotle, to Kant and Hegel, and into the twentieth century, the faculties of the mind were defined and redefined with each new thinker. Arendt had to say, *this* is what I mean by thinking; *this* is what I mean by judging. Only then would her arguments not just about Eichmann, but about totalitarianism, action, freedom, individuality, and human plurality—indeed her entire system of thought—reach their full potency.

Arendt did not avoid such an argument altogether in her earlier writing, although she concerned herself much more with the political implications of such thinking. In the 1945 essay "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," Arendt hints at the idea of banality in the SS ranks.<sup>3</sup> Then, in 1953 she wrote about "Understanding and Politics,"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Amos Elon "The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt", introduction to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, vii-xx

<sup>3</sup> "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility" in *Essays in Understanding*, Pp. 121-132. Also see Wolin, 59.

<sup>4</sup> "Understanding and Politics" in *Essays in Understanding*, 307-327

followed several years later by the essay “Truth and Politics”<sup>5</sup> in the expanded 1968 edition of *Between Past and Future*. Ronald Beiner argues, however, that with the 1971 essay, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,”<sup>6</sup> Arendt began to move away from examining the political implications of judgment, and instead concerned herself with judgment as a faculty of the mind, in connection with other mental abilities. “From that essay onward, judgment is considered from the point of view of the life of the mind.”<sup>7</sup>

With *The Life of the Mind* Arendt wanted to provide a complete account of all the faculties of the mind. She divided her project into three volumes.<sup>8</sup> Part one focuses on the faculty of thinking, its role in traditional philosophy, and its limitations discovered by Kant. Part two is much more a history of ideas, in which Arendt discusses the different ideas about the faculty of willing throughout the philosophical tradition, although Arendt prefers not think of the will as an idea in the proper sense (i.e. something created in the mind), but instead as a condition of the mind that has always existed, whether recognized or not. Part three, intended to cover the faculty of judgment, was never written. Arendt died in 1975, at the age of 69, shortly after finishing her volume on “Willing.” However, prior to her death, she did not remain silent about her intended arguments in “Judging.” In fact, she lectured extensively on the topic in 1970 at the New School for Social Research. Although known to Arendtian scholars, the lectures were not published until 1992 under the title *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. The lectures centered on

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<sup>5</sup> *Between Past and Future*, 223-259

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” *Social Research* Vol. 51 Nos. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1984), 7-37

<sup>7</sup> Beiner, “Hannah Arendt on Judging” in *Lectures*, 89-97

<sup>8</sup> At the time of her death Arendt thought that Willing and Judging would be combined in the second volume, but as Arendt’s friend and editor of *The Life of the Mind*, Mary McCarthy, wrote, “one can guess that judging might have... ended by taking up a whole volume to itself.” McCarthy is by no means alone in this opinion. Editor’s Postface to Hannah Arendt “Thinking,” Vol. 1 of *The Life of the Mind*, 219; Also reprinted in “Willing,” Vol. 2 of *The Life of the Mind*



Kant's final critique, *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, which Arendt believed to be Kant's most political writing.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Arendt's volume on thinking mirrored Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and her volume on willing, his *Critique of Practical Reason*. Indeed, it was always Arendt's intention to create *The Life of the Mind* as a parallel to Kant's three *Critiques*. Kant weighs heavily on Arendt's argument in "Thinking," and according to her, his third critique offers the most comprehensive view of judgment in the entire philosophical tradition. Surprisingly, though Kant is present in Arendt's volume on "Willing," he is not the centerpiece. Arendt turns the focus away from Kant because she argues that he subsumes willing (practical reason)<sup>10</sup> to the dictates of pure reason. Quoting another Kantian scholar Arendt affirms the argument that Kant's moral philosophy rested on the assumption that 'pure reason can be practical.'<sup>11</sup> Arendt, on the other hand argues that the three primary mental activities—thinking, willing, and judging—are interdependent. One cannot dominate over the others, and they cannot be derived from each other, or reduced to a common denominator.<sup>12</sup> Thus, with *The Life of the Mind* Arendt did not just regurgitate Kant's ideas, but instead created a back-and-forth dialogue with him, in which she, although owing much to Kant, does not hesitate to openly criticize him and assert her own point of view when necessary.

Kant played a major role in Arendt's thinking from a young age. By age sixteen she had read his *Critiques*, which helped her decide to make philosophy the center of her life's ambition. Yet even in her early writing Arendt remains suspicious of Kant's

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<sup>9</sup> Arendt's opinion is not universal to Kantian scholarship. Dana Villa points out that other Kantian scholars sometimes criticized Arendt for pulling a political philosophy out of the *Critique of Judgment* that was not there. See Dana Villa, 61-72

<sup>10</sup> Arendt definitively states "The Will in Kant is in fact 'practical reason'": "Willing," 63

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 149

<sup>12</sup> "Thinking," 69

rationalism. Thus, while *The Life of the Mind* offers new insights into Kant, Arendt also uses it to restate many of the criticisms found in her earlier works. As early as *The Human Condition* she rejects the philosophical tradition (Kant included) for its *contemptus mundi*, contempt for the world. She even wanted to give *The Human Condition* the title *amor mundi*, love of the world, to contrast it with the former.<sup>13</sup> Going back even further, Arendt gets the idea for “radical evil,” which she uses in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, from Kant himself. Yet even then she was critical of him for trying to rationalize his concept in order to fit his overall moral philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Still, there is little doubt that Arendt admired Kant’s *Critiques* for his method as much as his ideas. In her *Lectures* she discusses the idea of critical thinking, and why the three *Critiques* were indeed exercises in critical thought. For Kant, critical thinking was synonymous with enlightenment. He even called the Age of Enlightenment “the age of criticism,” adding, “...to such criticism everything must submit... [and] sustain the test of free and open examination.”<sup>15</sup> Critical thinking is equally opposed to skepticism as it is to dogmatism. As Arendt explains, the dogmatist believes he holds the one real truth, while the skeptic insists that no truth exists at all. “The critical position stands between them both.” Critical thinking argues that perhaps we can have a notion of truth, but in our limited capacities never be able to actually possess it. For Arendt, “The result of such criticism is *Selbstdenken*, to ‘use your own mind.’”<sup>16</sup> To understand Arendt’s point of view on *Selbstdenken*, we have to go back to her thoughts on Lessing.

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<sup>13</sup> Young-Breuhl, 324. Young-Breuhl gets the subtitle for her biography, *For Love of the World*, from this event in Arendt’s life.

<sup>14</sup> Bernstein, 145

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *Lectures*, 32

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

In *Rahel Varnhagen* Arendt was extremely critical of the salon society's adoption of Lessing's term. She wrote they used it to "bring liberation from objects and their reality," to create "a sphere of pure ideas." According to traditional metaphysics, truth remains universally valid insofar as it remains within the realm of ideas, but once it hits reality it is subject to experience. Additionally, the self, once it becomes an object of consciousness, ultimately rebounds upon itself. Self-thinking, then if it wishes to remain true, has to become introspection, for which Arendt had nothing positive to say.<sup>17</sup> For romantic introspection, the individuality of the self was indeed compatible with the universality of pure reason, leaving reality and, to Arendt's disgust, human plurality out of the equation altogether. In introspection, *Selbstdenken* becomes akin to thinking *about* oneself, rather than the Kantian pronouncement "to think *for* oneself." Arendt believes that Kant was much closer to Lessing's original intention. Included at the beginning of *Men in Dark Times* (1968) is a speech entitled "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts on Lessing,"<sup>18</sup> which Arendt gave upon accepting the Lessing Prize awarded to her by the free city of Hamburg. In her speech, she identifies Lessing's *Selbstdenken* as "independent thinking for oneself," which "is by no means an activity pertaining to a closed, integrated, organically grown, and cultivated individual." She continues, "For Lessing thought does not arise out of the individual and is not the manifestation of a self."<sup>19</sup> Here Arendt clearly refutes the Romantic view of self-thinking. Lessing, like Kant, did not believe in a single absolute truth. He thought that all truth should be subject to critical interpretation. Lessing "rejoiced...that the truth, as soon as it is uttered,

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<sup>17</sup> *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 90-92. Recall the arguments on introspection in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts About Lessing," trans. by Clara and Richard Winston in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1968)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9

is immediately transformed into one opinion among many, is contested, reformulated, reduced to one subject of discourse among others.”<sup>20</sup> So we have come full circle back to the idea of critical thinking, but critical thinking is not thinking as such. In order to distinguish between the two, one must first of all know what constitutes thinking as such. Kant sought to answer this question in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and so in turn did Arendt in “Thinking,” the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*.

### Thinking

With his critique Kant set out to find the limits of pure reason. As Arendt suggests, in doing so Kant addressed one of the three basic questions he believed drove all philosophy: What can I know? The other two being: What ought I to do? and What may I hope?<sup>21</sup> After subjecting pure reason to critical thinking, Kant came to the conclusion that a rift exists between reason (*Vernunft*) and intellect (*Verstand*).<sup>22</sup> Kant discovered what he called the “scandal of reason,” which is the fact that our mind is capable of conceiving things about which we can never obtain certain and verifiable knowledge. Nevertheless, we cannot help but think about them. Following Kant, Arendt lists these unknowables as 1) the freedom of the will; 2) the immortality of the soul; 3) the existence of God.<sup>23</sup> These “ultimate questions” give us an “urgent need” to reason, which different from and “more than [the] mere quest and desire for knowledge.”<sup>24</sup> Thus Arendt concludes,

[T]he distinguishing of the two faculties, reason and intellect, coincides with the distinction between two altogether different mental activities,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 27

<sup>21</sup> *Lectures*, 12

<sup>22</sup> “Thinking,” 13-14. Arendt prefers to translate *Verstand* as “intellect” rather than its more common translation of “understanding.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 12, 65

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 14

thinking and knowing, and two altogether different concerns, meaning in the first category, and cognition, in the second...if it is true that thinking and reason are justified in transcending the limitations of cognition and intellect—justified by Kant on the ground that the matters they deal with, though unknowable, are of the greatest existential interest to man—then the assumption must be that thinking and reason are not concerned with what the intellect is concerned with. To anticipate, and to put in a nutshell: *The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but the quest for meaning. Truth and meaning are not the same.* The basic fallacy, taking precedence over all specific metaphysical fallacies, is to interpret meaning on the model of truth. (emp. in text)<sup>25</sup>

Reason, which Arendt also calls the faculty of speculative thought,<sup>26</sup> while still imperative to philosophy, does not produce truth; it is only capable of producing meaning. Cognition, on the other hand, does produce truth, but not meaning. She explains,

The distinction, on its most elementary level, and in Kant's own words, lies in the fact that "concepts of reason serve us to conceive (*begreifen*, comprehend) as concepts of the intellect serve us to apprehend perceptions"... In other words, the intellect (*Verstand*) desires to grasp what is given to the senses, reason wishes to understand its *meaning*. Cognition, whose highest criterion is truth, derives that criterion for the world of appearances in which we take our bearings through sense perceptions, whose testimony is self-evident, that is, unshakable by argument and replaceable only by other evidence. As the German translation of the Latin *perceptio*, the word *Wahrnehmung* used by Kant (what is given me in perceptions and ought to be true [*Wahr*]) clearly indicates truth is located in the evidence of the senses. But that is by no means the case with meaning and with the faculty of thought, which searches for it; the latter does not ask what something is or whether it exists at all—its existence is always taken for granted—but *what it means for it to be*. This distinction between truth and meaning seems to me to be not only decisive for any inquiry into the nature of human thinking but also to be the necessary consequence of Kant's crucial distinction between reason and intellect.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 14-15

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 62

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 57-58

With this argument Arendt reveals that her notion of thinking as such is derived directly from Kant. While she did not draw all the same conclusion as Kant, her debt to him is undeniable.

In one section of “Thinking” Arendt tackles the “old metaphysical dichotomy of (true) Being and (mere) appearances;” what she calls the “two-world theory.”<sup>28</sup> It is a hierarchical idea, that in order to find true Being the philosopher must transcend the world given to him. Reality can deceive and conceal truth. It can appear as nothing more than shadows on a wall (to use Plato’s metaphor). Metaphysical thinking is essentially an escape from this world, and an escape from the body. On this matter Kant and Arendt are in complete agreement with Plato, Aristotle and the philosophical tradition. The key characteristic of thinking is *withdrawal*.<sup>29</sup> Arendt, in line with her existential philosophy, denies the hierarchy that places thinking above all else, but she does not deny that thinking itself constitutes a withdrawal from appearances. She writes, “From the viewpoint of the thinking ego, the body is nothing but an obstacle.”<sup>30</sup> Kant, however, did indeed accept the old metaphysical hierarchy, and at the root of his moral philosophy thinking (pure reason) reigns supreme. Yet, Kant’s acceptance of the tradition was not wholesale. Plato began philosophy with the idea that truth and Being are inseparable. Kant, as we have seen, did not ascribe to the notion of true Being. Truth, he argues, because it claims absolute validity, is based on a principle of certainty. Metaphysics, on the other hand, is defined precisely by its uncertainty. It never appears to us, and aside

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 23-26

<sup>29</sup> Note the connection between the withdrawal of thinking and Arendt’s earlier arguments against escapism.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 44-45, 34. Also see “Thinking” p. 79 and “What is Existential Philosophy?” in *Essays in Understanding* (p. 163-187) for Arendt’s discussion of the obsession with death rampant throughout philosophy.

from thinking about it, we cannot conceive of it in any way. It stands in opposition to reality. For this reason Kant rejects Descartes' axiom, "I think therefore I am." Arendt argues that Kant is "entirely right" to say the thought 'I *am not*...cannot exist; for if I am not, it follows that I cannot become aware I am not.' (emp. in text)<sup>31</sup> The I-am is already inherent in the I-think, and therefore thinking cannot produce the certainty of reality, as Descartes hoped; it can only choose to accept it or reject it. In "What is Existential Philosophy?" Arendt labels Kant as a forerunner to existential thought for precisely this reason.<sup>32</sup> Thinking cannot tell us how reality exists as knowledge can. Thinking can only help us interpret reality and give it meaning. The only place thinking can escape this limitation is in the metaphysical realm, where existence is no longer relevant. Remember that the purpose of Kant's critical thinking was to find the limits of pure reason. Truth is forged in existence and experience, something thinking simply cannot grasp. Kant may have kept with the traditional hierarchy of Being over appearance, but within his philosophy Being was equated with meaning, not truth. By elevating meaning over truth, Kant directly confronted the Platonic idea that Being and truth were one in the same. Moses Mendelssohn called Kant the "all-destroyer" of metaphysics for doing so.<sup>33</sup> Kant insists on ideas as "thought-things," and not as objects as such. Objects are things which appear in the phenomenal world. We know objects, but do not think about them. For something to appear it must be 'standing still and remaining' long enough to be recognized by a subject. Transcendent objects (thought-things or ideas) are fleeting and never actually appear, in the proper sense, anywhere.<sup>34</sup> What Kant is doing here is

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<sup>31</sup> "Thinking," 49

<sup>32</sup> "What is Existential Philosophy" in *Essays in Understanding*, 168-169

<sup>33</sup> "Thinking," 9; *Lectures*, 34

<sup>34</sup> "Thinking," 45, 40

defining where metaphysics ends and reality begins. The metaphysical realm (the noumenal world) cannot be known the same way we know the phenomenal world. Metaphysical thinking then becomes a redundant term as all thinking is inherently metaphysical.

In the introduction to “Thinking” Arendt returns to the question of Eichmann, reiterating her characterization of him as not being evil or stupid, but “thoughtless.” She confesses that the question “What is thinking” had occupied her mind since writing *The Human Condition*, in which she contrasted the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, but it was the Eichmann trial that solidified her decision to fully investigate all her doubts about the thinking activity. She writes, “It was this absence of thinking...that awakened my interest.” She then asks, “Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty from telling right and wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought?”<sup>35</sup> With this question Arendt went looking for Eichmann’s conscience. Drawing on Kant’s distinctions between reason and intellect, Arendt further distinguished between conscience and consciousness. She argued that the conscience did indeed arise out of the thinking process. Consciousness, on the other hand, was a form of cognition. She concluded, continuing along Kantian lines, the conscience dealt in terms of meaning, and consciousness in terms of truth.

Much of the criticism that Arendt aimed at other thinkers is drawn from the fact that they somehow try to combine reason and intellect, thinking and knowing, or meaning and truth. Arendt is just as critical of modern science for confusing these concepts as she is of ancient metaphysics. She writes,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 3-6.



With the rise of the modern age, thinking became chiefly the handmaiden of science, of organized knowledge; and even though thinking then grew extremely active, following modernity's crucial conviction that I can know only what I myself make, it was Mathematics, the non-empirical science par excellence, wherein the mind appears only to play with itself, that turned out to be the Science of sciences, delivering the key to those laws of nature and the universe that are concealed by appearances...[I]t became axiomatic for Descartes—during the famous night of his “revelation”—that there existed ‘a fundamental accord between the laws of nature... and the laws of mathematics’...And he actually believed with this kind of thinking...he could deliver certain knowledge about the existence of God, the nature of the soul, and similar matters.<sup>36</sup>

For Arendt, as in Kant, we have seen that such questions are of course unknowable.

Modern science, encouraged by Descartes, tried to use thinking as a means to knowing, but for Arendt this was not possible.

Descartes is symptomatic of the modern confusion that thinking somehow produces consciousness. In “Thinking” Arendt refers the reader back to similar comments made in *The Human Condition*.<sup>37</sup> She argues that all modern philosophy began with Cartesian doubt, the idea that only through doubting reality in the activity of thought can one begin to find a level of certainty. For Arendt, thinking can conceive of reality, but its “realness...remains stubbornly out of reach.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, thinking has no direct, “matter-of-fact” connection to reality. She argues it was precisely Descartes’ thought that “destroyed his common-sense trust in reality, and his error was to hope he could overcome his doubt by insisting on withdrawing from the world altogether, eliminating every worldly reality from his thoughts and concentrating on the thinking

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>37</sup> On “Thinking” p. 47 Arendt refers the reader to a section of *The Human Condition* entitled “The Rise of Cartesian Doubt” (Pp. 273-280). Indeed, everything in the final chapter of *The Human Condition* serves as a great pre-cursor to Arendt’s later thoughts.

<sup>38</sup> “Thinking,” 49

activity itself.”<sup>39</sup> Descartes wanted something whose reality was beyond suspicion. He found it in the “certainty of consciousness.”<sup>40</sup> In *the Human Condition* Arendt writes, “Descartes concluded that those processes which go on in the mind of man himself have a certainty of their own, they can become the object of investigation in introspection.”<sup>41</sup> Thinking, as Arendt continually argues, cannot become an object for itself. Introspection tries to think about the self, which is impossible. The self is instead an object of consciousness, of cognition. It explains to us how we exist as individuals. Thinking can only go as far as to conceive that we do exist, but has no clue to the manner in which we do. Our individuality is a condition of our particular existence, and as such beyond the grasp of thinking. So, when introspection vainly tries to replace thinking with knowing, the self becomes elevated to a primal position in the mind. It essentially takes the place of the conscience, and in doing so creates meaning out of interaction with itself. Meaning is no longer the product of thinking, but knowledge instead, and self-knowledge at that. Self-consciousness, because of its ultimate certainty, becomes the measure of all things, both seen and unseen—a proposition Arendt finds highly offensive. Self-consciousness is then called thinking to further justify the illusion, self-thinking to be precise, which as we have seen is a perversion of the term. Introspection elevates the role of the individual self at the cost of both reality and thinking as such. That is why Arendt accuses Descartes of “radical subjectivism.”<sup>42</sup> Arendt’s accusation is also directed at modern philosophy in general. It has already been argued that Arendt viewed mass society not as a plurality, but as a group of “isolated individuals.” This is because

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 48

<sup>41</sup> *The Human Condition*, 280

<sup>42</sup> “Thinking,” 47

modern philosophy elevates the individual to the point where Man, not men, inhabits the earth. This symptom, Arendt argues, found its greatest expression in the late 18<sup>th</sup>/early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when Enlightenment philosophers tried to justify the “abstract man” in terms of rational thought, and Romantics asserted the individual self as the standard of all things. Both, Arendt argues, had their origins in Descartes.

Descartes wanted to make individual thought the vehicle for universal reason. The two were compatible in his eyes because every individual was capable of conceiving universally valid truths. Thus, for Descartes what binds mankind together as a whole is our individually shared capacity for reason. Arendt argues, however, that in doing so Descartes did not conceive of mankind as a plurality but instead as a group of individuals. Furthermore, nothing differentiated these individuals, only the fact they were equally part of a greater whole, mankind. To compensate for the loss of the individual, Descartes retreated into the world of self-knowledge, as we have seen. In the realm of introspection the individual could retain subjective truths while still acknowledging rational truths that bound him together with other individuals. For Descartes, the individual could conceive of his existence objectively (rationally), as well as the manner in which he existed subjectively. Thus, the individual was completely autonomous, what Dana Villa calls the “subjectification of reality.”<sup>43</sup> But when considered as part of mankind, he was also completely powerless in the face of universal laws that made him simply part of a greater whole. Arendt’s argument against Descartes’ autonomous yet powerless individual comes from her critique of rationalism in general as elevating universals over particulars. She is just as critical of Kant for promoting universal conceptions of mankind to endorse

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<sup>43</sup> Villa, 11

notions of perpetual progress in history.<sup>44</sup> Dana Villa writes, “Kant escapes what he considers to be the self-evident meaninglessness of the particular by ascending to the level of the ‘whole.’”<sup>45</sup> Kant, like Descartes, argued that mankind is driven by reason, which is unchanging and universal, and as such is unaltered by the subjective interests its individual parts. The Enlightenment concept of the “abstract man” was Descartes’ autonomous, yet powerless, individual.<sup>46</sup> Arendt’s argument is that Descartes created an individual/mankind dichotomy, in which each is completely autonomous within its own sphere. There is no thought of plurality, of inter-subjectivity, and thus, there is no room for politics as a community of men. For Arendt, Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic introspection solidified this dichotomy as the keystone modern philosophy. Mass society then rose as a group of isolated individuals, and not as a plurality. She writes in a letter to Karl Jaspers, “the omnipotence of an individual man would make men superfluous.”<sup>47</sup> Here Arendt is clearly tying the individualistic ideas of Descartes, Kant, and others to the development of superfluousness, and by extension totalitarianism, in modern times.

According to Arendt, German idealists after Kant, though indebted to his ideas, were unable to sustain his distinction between reason and intellect. They created phenomenology as a “Science of the Experience of Consciousness,” in which speculative

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<sup>44</sup> In *Between Past and Future* she writes, “Yet Kant also saw what others had seen before him, that once you look at history in its entirety (*im Grossen*), rather than at single events and the ever-frustrated intentions of the human agents, everything suddenly makes sense...the process as a whole appears to be guided by an ‘intention of nature’ unknown to acting men but comprehensible to those who come after them. By pursuing their own aims without rhyme or reason men seem to be led by the ‘the guiding thread of reason’ (P. 82). Here Arendt clearly shows her belief in the idea of progress as detrimental to genuine political action because it elevates the universal over the particular. Progress and mankind are symbiotic concepts in Arendt’s eyes, and she is critical of them both.

<sup>45</sup> Villa, 66.

<sup>46</sup> Recall in chapter one of this thesis Fichte’s argument for the “duality of the power and impotence of man in history.” Note that Fichte tried to escape this duality by asserting the perpetual progress of mankind, much like Kant before him had. (See *Rahel Varnhagen*, 180-183)

<sup>47</sup> Arendt and Jaspers, 166

thought was somehow meant to bridge the gap, while at the same time keeping the separation intact. Arendt suggests that phenomenologists began

[E]agerly blurring the distinction between reason's concern with the unknowable and the intellect's concern with cognition. Pursuing the Cartesian ideal of certainty as though Kant had never existed, they believed in all earnest that the results of their speculations possessed the same kind of validity as the results of cognitive processes.<sup>48</sup>

Speculative thought was again an attempt to think about reality, but through the lens of consciousness. Phenomenology was actually the activity of thinking about consciousness itself. The certainty of consciousness was then attributed to ideas found through speculative reason. Instead of trying to replace thinking with knowing, speculative reason tried to combine the two in a strange attempt to place meaning on knowledge by thinking about it, and at the same time to place certainty on thinking by directing it towards consciousness. For Arendt, the closest thinking can come is to have a memory of consciousness. The only way in fact that thinking can even conceive of reality is by remembering it. Memories are, of course, not reality but an image of reality. "Representation, making present what is actually absent, is the mind's unique gift."<sup>49</sup> This unique gift is not memory itself, but another mental activity, imagination, which uses memory to engage the conscience. Imagination allows us to think about our memories, giving them meaning. According to Arendt, St. Augustine was able to articulate this idea better than any philosopher before or after him, with the exception of Kant.<sup>50</sup>

Imagination was so important to Arendt that she later returned to the subject in her

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<sup>48</sup> "Thinking," 16. Also see p. 63-64.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 77

*Lectures*, preparing to tackle the faculty of judgment.<sup>51</sup> It is safe to assume that she would have given it ample coverage if “Judging” had been written.

### Willing

In the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt refers to willing as the “immediate datum of consciousness,” meaning the will uses consciousness as a basis for action.<sup>52</sup> Yet, willing is not synonymous with acting. Willing takes place solely within the mind (*vita contemplativa*), while action takes place outside the mind (*vita activa*). Arendt’s distaste for Rousseau arises out his belief that willing can somehow take the place of action. Likewise, the will is not dependent on reason or the intellect. Arendt’s key idea is interdependence. The will works *with* the other mental faculties not *for* them, as Kant argued. Willing is not completely independent either. Such an argument would be no different than the common philosophical argument that pure thinking alone can suffice for the mind to function properly. Philosophy has a hard time incorporating the will because by it runs counter to the supremacy of reason. She writes, “What aroused the philosopher’s distrust in this faculty was its inevitable connection with Freedom.”<sup>53</sup> Recall, however, Arendt’s arguments in “What is Freedom” in the previous chapter on the differences between inner freedom, which takes place in the mind, and freedom of action, which she equates with political freedom. For Arendt, willing alone is not sufficient for freedom. Freedom itself is a political quality. It is achieved only through action.

Yet, for Arendt, the will is indeed “free” in the sense that it cannot be dictated by necessity. Quoting Augustine, Arendt argues, “If I must necessarily will, then why need I

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<sup>51</sup> *Lectures*, 79-85

<sup>52</sup> “Willing,” 5

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

speaking of will at all?”<sup>54</sup> As Arendt continually argued in her earlier works, freedom is defined by something that may or may not be. If it is forced or cannot be otherwise, then it is not free. Arendt anticipates this argument in “Thinking” with a discussion of contingency versus necessity. At the center of the discussion are Leibniz’s two categories of truth: the truth of facts and the truths of reason. The truths of fact are what Kant would come to identify as truth itself. They are contingent upon reality and dependent on existence. Truths of fact change based on the reality of their objects. If an object changes its appearance, or ceases to exist, then its truths change as well. Truth of reason, on the other hand, cannot ever change. They are closer to Arendt’s concept of “thinking.” Because they cannot change, they are characterized by necessity. If something is necessarily true, then it is irresistible to rational thought. “Truth [of reason] compels with the force of necessity.” As Arendt points out, this caused Hugo Grotius to utter the sentiment ‘even God cannot make two times two not equal four.’<sup>55</sup> He believed that it would always be true no matter what. Here we see a pre-cursor to Enlightenment thought, where even God is subject to the laws of rationality. Again this was not completely new to philosophy. Leibniz and Grotius drew from the Platonic idea that the higher ontological order consists of things that are necessary and cannot be otherwise, rather than things that are contingent and could be different should their reality change. It is the old philosophical hierarchy of true Being over mere appearances, which we have already discussed.

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<sup>54</sup> “Willing,” 5

<sup>55</sup> “Thinking,” 60; “Willing,” 4

The will, because it is free and deals with contingent existence, cannot be conceived of in terms of rational truth (truths of reason).<sup>56</sup> That is why only a select few philosophers (Arendt uses St. Augustine and Duns Scotus as her examples) actually conceived of a free will that is not under the dictates of thought.<sup>57</sup> Thought is characterized by its uncertainty, its distance from knowledge. A common mistake among philosophers was to assume that because willing uses the objects of consciousness, it too is characterized by certainty. However, such is not the case. Willing is, in fact, just as uncertain as thinking. This is so because willing directs itself towards the future, using conscious objects as a guide for the possibility of potential objects. Arendt argues that the will “is as obviously our mental organ for the future as memory is our mental organ for the past. The moment we turn our mind to the future, we are no longer concerned with ‘objects’ but *projects* (emp. in text).”<sup>58</sup> Projects cannot be known in the same way objects can, and are thus subject to uncertainty. Thinking and willing come into conflict over the ancient distinction between necessity and contingency. Thinking, though uncertain of reality, carries with it an illusion of necessity, because the “truths of reason” are undeniable to rational thought. Also, in examining the re-presentations of memory, thinking finds that the past cannot be changed, cannot be otherwise, and is in a sense necessary.<sup>59</sup> Willing, on the other hand, is equally as uncertain, but cannot possibly assume necessity for projects, because unlike the past, which already has been, the future

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<sup>56</sup> Recall in Chapter 3 of this thesis how Plato turned the Homeric idea of necessity on its head by shifting his emphasis away from action altogether and escaping into pure thought.

<sup>57</sup> Arendt argues this despite the fact that Augustine’s ideas eventually led him to the doctrine of predestination, an anathema to free will. See “Willing” Pp. 86, 104, 109. Also, for all of Nietzsche’s association with the will, Arendt does not include him in the list of such thinkers. She instead suggests that he argued for a “repudiation of the will.” See “Willing” Pp. 166-169, 172

<sup>58</sup> “Willing,” 13-14

<sup>59</sup> This is why Lessing and other enlightened thinkers went looking for rational truths in history. Recall the arguments on Lessing in Chapter 1 of this thesis.



is always open to change. Free action, which springs from a free will, is by its nature contingent. Arendt writes, “There is hardly anything more contingent than willed acts which—on the assumption of free will—could all be defined as acts about which I know that I could as well have left them undone.”<sup>60</sup>

Kant spent a great deal of effort dealing with the faculty of the will because, like most philosophers, he found it very hard to reconcile its inherent freedom and spontaneity with the necessity of rational truth. His response to this divide was the formulation of his categorical imperative, through which he tried to create a bridge between necessity and contingency, between morality and freedom. Kant first created the imperative in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, and he restates it in the *Critique of Practical Reason* as “Act in such a way that the maxim of your will can always be thought of as being, at the same time, a principle underlying universal legislation.”<sup>61</sup> Crucial to Kant’s imperative is the distinction between subjective *maxims*, valid only for the will of the individual, and objective principles/practical *laws*, that are valid for the will of every rational being.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the categorical imperative argues that the individual should subjectively will that which could at the same time be willed by all rational beings. Because the categorical imperative engages both subjectivity and objectivity at the same time, it also engages both truth and meaning. Truth, because it can achieve objective knowledge, relates us to the objects of our action. By doing so it provides an objective reality, subject to universal laws, in which we can act. Without this reality, meaning remains subjective in the sense that it “exists” (though it cannot exist in the proper sense)

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 14

<sup>61</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by H.W. Cassirer, edited by G. Heath King and Ronald Weitzman, with an introduction by D.M. MacKinnon, (Milwaukee, Marquette Univ. Press, 1998), 33.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 18

only in the mind of the individual, and as such can only provide maxims. Still, for Kant meaning is given supremacy because it essentially tells us *how* to act. Without meaning our actions, though based in reality and applicable to universal laws, are unguided by morality. They become simple means-end operations.<sup>63</sup> Thus, Kant conceives of morality in terms of meaning, but in order to will morality, rather than just thinking about it, we need to be able to apply meaning to the truths found through cognition and knowledge. In other words, Kant uses the categorical imperative as the practical application of pure reason. Kant even uses the term “pure practical reason” to explain his argument. He explicitly calls the categorical imperative ‘The Fundamental Law Issuing in Pure Practical Reason.’<sup>64</sup> In his Preface to the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant states that one of his goals is “to establish the fact that there is such a thing as pure practical reason.”<sup>65</sup> He argues that although ideas cannot have an objective reality outside the world of appearances, “it was still possible to grant this reality to them in application to the objects of pure practical reason.”<sup>66</sup> Kant is quick to point out, however, that objective reality cannot by any means exert the kind of determinism on pure ideas that it does on truth. Kant reiterates the distinction between reason and intellect, between meaning and truth, because another of his goals in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is to place the categorical imperative within the context of his findings in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and not in contradiction to them. Pure practical reason,

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<sup>63</sup> Recall Arendt’s distaste in *The Human Condition* for philosophies that give primacy to means-end thinking (the idea of making as opposed to doing) in the previous chapter. See Dana Villa *Arendt and Heidegger* for a further discussion of Arendt’s views on the difference between making and doing. (p. 17-25, 42-49.) Kant does not deny the practicality of means-end thinking, but it clearly does not provide a basis for morality. Thus, he critiques practical reason as being insufficient for moral action by itself, but when pure reason is able to provide the ends for practical reason then it has a goal outside itself. Its practicality is given meaning. (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 70, 115)

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

although it is willed, must also subject itself to the rules of pure thinking. In “Willing” Arendt argues that Kant conceives of the will in two ways.<sup>67</sup> The first is a completely free will that is both spontaneous and autonomous; it begins something entirely new with each new act. For Kant, this could in no way produce morality, and so he does little to reconcile it with his overall moral philosophy. Kant even speaks of the embarrassment of “speculative reason in dealing with the question of the freedom of the will.”<sup>68</sup> To fix this problem Kant conceived of the will in terms of practical reason, which can be used by pure reason to create pure practical reason. Pure practical reason receives its law from the categorical imperative, “which tells the will what to do and adds: Don’t make an exception for yourself, obey the axiom of non-contradiction, which, since Socrates, has ruled the soundless dialogue of thought.”<sup>69</sup> For Kant, the will could be free and moral at the same time if used in accordance with the categorical imperative.<sup>70</sup> Kant formulated his philosophy in such a way because it enabled him to answer another of his three basic questions for philosophy: What ought I to do?

Arendt argues that Kant’s conception of pure practical reason and his equation of freedom and morality led later philosophers to substitute willing for reason as man’s highest mental faculty. She writes, “After Kant it became fashionable to equate Willing and Being.”<sup>71</sup> She attacks German idealists, beginning with Hegel, for blurring Kant’s distinction between reason and intellect. Because they tried to “think” about consciousness, they imposed the necessity of thinking onto the contingency of willing, giving birth to the modern concept of history. According to Arendt, “No philosopher has

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<sup>67</sup> “Willing,” 62-63

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 63

<sup>70</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, 2

<sup>71</sup> “Willing,” 20

described the thinking ego in its clash with the willing ego with greater sympathy, insight, and consequence for the history of thought than Hegel.”<sup>72</sup> Hegel’s understanding of history began with a dialectical understanding of the present and the future. He writes, “The future is directly within the present, for it is contained as its negative fact.”<sup>73</sup> Through this dialectical process Hegel finds meaning, which along Kantian lines, he equates with Being. In other words, Being reveals itself in the instance when the future negates the present, but then manifests itself in reality once again in the new present, and the process starts over again. From this idea Hegel arrives at the notion of infinite progress, which is inherent in his concept of history. The philosopher’s job is to look at history as the result of previous present/future dialectics and find the manifestations of Being within. Hegel’s world spirit is simply the ways in which Being manifested itself in history.<sup>74</sup> Because Hegel wanted to emphasize progress he insisted on the primacy of the future over the past. Yet, Hegel’s future was anything but contingent and uncertain. Using his dialectic, Hegel sees the future as another potential present to be supplanted, and thus as another potential past as well, “when the immediate I-shall-be will have become an I-shall-have-been. In this schema the past is produced by the future, and thinking, which contemplates the past, is the result of the Will.”<sup>75</sup> Hegel identifies the will as the source of freedom, but because he uses it as part of his dialectic of infinite progress, freedom then comes as a result of necessity.<sup>76</sup> Willing, though it deals with action more than any of the other mental faculties, does not deal directly with the conscience. According to Arendt, simply by willing an action we cannot tell whether it is

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 41

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 41-51

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 140

right or wrong, only that we willed to do so. Thus, Eichmann's lack of conscience was not a crisis of willing.

### Judging

In "Thinking" and "Willing" Arendt uses most of her argument to criticize other thinkers for misplacing or misunderstanding the faculties of the mind, causing them to draw false conclusions. Of all things, she makes the least effort towards defining conscience, even though this seemed to be her primary goal, in light of Eichmann's lack of one. The only thing she explains is that we cannot arrive at the conscience through self-consciousness. It is a product of thinking because it deals in matters of meaning, not truth. Conscience is definitely not the self, but neither is it sheer thinking. Arendt repeatedly asserted that thinking as such seeks to withdraw from the world. If conscience withdraws from the world, then how could it tell us what is right and what is wrong in this world? In the end Arendt left the notion of conscience largely unexplored because she so closely ties it to her third and final faculty of the mind: judging. In writing "Thinking" and "Willing" she must have anticipated that conscience would be her primary concern in "Judging," so she saved most of argument from the first two volumes. In "Judging" she would have finally been ready to bring her arguments about Eichmann to a close. From the beginning she accused Eichmann of losing the ability "to think *and* to judge." For Arendt, the loss of thought and judgment go hand-in-hand because of their mutual connection to the conscience. Although "Judging" could not be written, with Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* and a few hints in *The Life of the Mind*, a clear picture of her concept of judging, as well as conscience, does emerge.

Although Arendt accused Eichmann of the inability to think, she did so in connection with judging. The distinctions Arendt draws in “Thinking” between thinking and knowing are not meant to be directed at Eichmann, but instead at philosophy itself, both ancient and modern. Of course Eichmann was affected by trends in modern philosophy, just as any other person living in the twentieth century, but to say that Arendt’s disgust at Eichmann resulted from his misinterpretation of the concept of thought is simply ridiculous. Arendt would have been hard-pressed to find anyone calling Eichmann a philosopher. So, Arendt’s focus for interpreting Eichmann is found in her ideas on judging, and how it works with thinking to tell right from wrong.

The first hint of judging comes in “Thinking” when Arendt discusses what she calls “common-sense reasoning.”<sup>77</sup> She writes,

The reality of what I perceive is guaranteed by its worldly context, which includes others who perceive as I do, on the one hand, and by the working together of my five senses on the other. What since Thomas Aquinas we call common sense, the *sensus communis*, is a kind of sixth sense needed to keep my five senses together and guarantee that it is the same object that I see, touch, taste, smell, and hear; it is the ‘one faculty [that] extends to all objects of the five senses.’ This same sense, a mysterious ‘sixth sense’ because it cannot be localized in a bodily organ, fits the sensations of my strictly private five senses... into a common world shared by others. The subjectivity of the it-seems-to-me is remedied by the fact that the same object appears to others, though its mode of appearance may be different. It is the inter-subjectivity of the world, rather than similarity of physical appearance, that convinces men that they belong to the same species. Though each single object appears in a different perspective to each individual, the context in which it appears is the same for the whole species.<sup>78</sup>

Arendt’s words here are important for several reasons. First of all, with phrases like “common world shared by others” and “inter-subjectivity” she is clearly arguing that common sense works with human plurality, not against it. Thus, it is not surprising that

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<sup>77</sup> “Thinking,” 50-65

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 50

she find it favorable to political action. Second, Arendt is sure to point out that common sense is not thinking. She argues that it may be tempting to equate the two because common sense does not appear as the other senses do, and thus seems invisible like thought. But common sense helps “guarantee” reality, and in doing so remains in this world, as thinking does not.<sup>79</sup> Finally, along similar lines, Arendt argues that common sense is indeed a “sense,” and thus its purpose is to perceive objects. What common sense can perceive that no other sense can is the sheer there-ness of an object, its reality or “realness.”<sup>80</sup> “Thinking can neither prove nor destroy the *feeling* of realness arising out of the sixth sense;” an error we have seen that Descartes did not avoid.<sup>81</sup>

According to Arendt, philosophy traditionally tied the notion of conscience exclusively to thought. Reason or revelation (depending on the philosopher) used the thinking process to inform conscience of right and wrong. Arendt does not necessarily deviate from this position either, as she still argues conscience comes through meaning, a product of thinking. What traditional philosophy tried to do was extend the conscience into reality by way of thinking. Conscience did not just give the meaning of right and wrong, but was also able to say *this* particular object or event is right or wrong. It did not seem odd to traditional philosophy that conscience could be a sense, based in reality, and at the same time completely subsumed under the dictates of thought. Arendt quotes the term “silent sense” traditionally used for conscience to show that philosophy equated conscience with common sense.<sup>82</sup> Traditional philosophy was apt to confuse conscience and common sense precisely because it confused thinking and knowing, meaning and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 52; Also see *The Human Condition* p. 280-284 where Arendt, using Descartes as her example, relates introspection with the loss of common sense.

<sup>82</sup> *Lectures*, 4

truth. Arendt argues, however, that common sense is not conscience, because common sense actually cares little for meaning. “Questions of meaning are unanswerable by common sense,” because its function is to recognize objects in this world.<sup>83</sup> Common-sense reasoning and common sense experience do more to answer the questions of knowing. Common sense helps us know that the particular objects of our senses are indeed real; it perceives their reality.

Arendt argues that even Kant, despite his ideas on meaning and truth, desperately tried to fit conscience into the traditional mold because of the metaphysical hierarchy that made pure thought the highest ontological category. Kant tried to make conscience dictate right and wrong to reality, but his separation of meaning and truth kept him from asserting the reality of conscience. Just as the categorical imperative cannot become an object of cognition, neither can the conscience. In his *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant calls the conscience “a faculty to be met within ourselves,”<sup>84</sup> while also referring to the categorical imperative as “the moral law within ourselves.”<sup>85</sup> Conscience is then the mental manifestation of the categorical imperative, making it synonymous with Kant’s notion of a “thing-in-itself:” something that appears to the mind but cannot appear to the senses. Because conscience cannot appear to the senses, it can have no common-sense reality. According to Arendt, Kant was then forced to create the concept of judgment, acting as a mediator between conscience and reality. Judgment could in no way create meaning, but it could examine meaning to say of reality: *this* (object, not idea) is right or wrong, or even *this* is beautiful or ugly.<sup>86</sup> In traditional philosophy conscience did this by

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<sup>83</sup> *Thinking*, 58-59; *Lectures*, 4

<sup>84</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, 121

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 201

<sup>86</sup> *Lectures*, 66



itself. The mutual concern with particular objects makes judgment and common sense very closely related. Judgment and common sense are so close in fact that Kant tried to hypothesize “Taste [Judgment] as a kind of *sensus communis*,” but Arendt does not want to equate the two.<sup>87</sup> She argues that common sense can only perceive an object as real; it cannot relate an object to meaning as judging can. Kant tried to equate the two because he argued, “[U]nder the *sensus communis* we must include the idea of sense *common to all*, i.e., [the idea] of a faculty of judgment.”<sup>88</sup> From here Kant begins to direct his attention towards human plurality. In Arendt’s eyes, he was one of only a few philosophers ever to do so, which explains her admiration for him.

Speaking of a sense common to all, Kant insists on the communicability of judgment. People cannot force others to accept their judgments; all they can do is persuade them. No one can definitively say one thing is more beautiful than another, but they can make an argument to be heard by others. Thus, judgments must be spoken.<sup>89</sup> Thinking back to the previous chapter, recall that one of Arendt’s most basic ideas is that speech maintains the public realm. Speech is the most political of all actions. Arendt sees judgment as the most political faculty of the mind for such reasons.<sup>90</sup> Thinking is only made political in its relationship to judging. Based on this argument, Arendt asserts that Kant’s political philosophy was more apparent in his *Critique of Judgment* than his *Critique of Practical Reason*.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 70-72

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 71

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 40, 72, 120

<sup>90</sup> Beiner, “Hannah Arendt on Judging” in *Lectures*, 109-114

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 101. Ronald Beiner makes this assumption in his interpretative essay based on arguments Arendt made in her 1961 essay “Freedom and Politics,” in which she writes “[I]t can, I think, be seen from all his political writings that for Kant himself the theme of ‘judgment’ carries more weight than that of ‘practical reason.’” Again, Arendt does not speak for all Kantian scholars when making this argument.

Kant's moral philosophy still influenced his political philosophy. Where that influence becomes apparent is precisely where Arendt's own thoughts begin to deviate from Kant. The first clue is Kant's distinction between "the principle according to which you should act and the principle according to which you judge."<sup>92</sup> Arendt would make no such distinction. According to Arendt, Kant's separation of the two created a conflict between morality and politics. Kant's solution to this conflict is his categorical imperative, and it is how he re-asserts the supremacy of reason.<sup>93</sup> Morality deals in terms of universals, and politics in terms of particulars. The categorical imperative uses the particulars given to it to act on the universality of reason (morality). Morality in essence tells the imperative what to do. For Kant, "the question of the right and wrong is to be decided by neither taste nor judgment but by reason alone."<sup>94</sup> Arendt argues that judgment is not a product of thinking, because it perceives reality in a way thinking cannot. Yet, to justify his categorical imperative, Kant speaks of moral judgments. "These, according to Kant, are necessary; they are dictated by practical reason. They might be communicated, but this communication is secondary, even if they could not be communicated they would remain valid."<sup>95</sup> Moral judgments come strikingly close to the autonomy of the conscience in traditional philosophy. As we have seen, Kant was never able to abandon the metaphysical hierarchy of Being over appearance, necessity over contingency, universals over particulars. Arendt writes,

For judgment of the particular...has no place in Kant's moral philosophy.  
Judgment is not practical reason; practical reason 'reasons' and tells me

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<sup>92</sup> *Lectures*, 48

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

what to do and what not to do; it lays down the law and is identical with the will, and the will utters commands; it speaks in imperatives.<sup>96</sup>

The categorical imperative does not judge particulars; it acts on them by way of the will. Thus, Kant makes the distinction between the principle on which we act on the one hand and the principle on which we judge on the other. Morality, and by extension pure reason, is the principle for action. For Kant, judging things as right or wrong does not necessarily prompt action, but if we do choose to act, then it is not our judgment but our reason that guides us. Kant's arguments become apparent in his cry for the public use of one's *reason*, not the public use of one's *judgment*, as Arendt would argue. Arendt insists Kant "unequivocally and consistently throughout his work" argues that political freedom is the public use of one's reason.<sup>97</sup> Arendt, on the other hand, sees this as contradictory because of reason's necessity. To use it publicly does not mean to persuade others, but instead to force them, because if they are reasonable (i.e. rational thinkers) they cannot possibly decide otherwise. For Arendt, this is not freedom.

The fact that Kant conceives of freedom in terms of a free public does at least give Arendt hope. By engaging the idea of a public in his concept of freedom, Kant endorses the idea that humans exist in a plurality. A key part of Kant's notion of *Selbstdenken* is to think with an "enlarged mentality." Thinking with an enlarged mentality means taking on the viewpoint of others. In doing so, we can obtain impartiality, which is crucial for judging.<sup>98</sup> Impartiality is important to both Kant and Arendt because they conceive of the judge as a spectator. The spectator presupposes plurality because in order for there to be a spectator there has to be an actor that is being

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 42-43

viewed. The spectator judges that actor. The more often we become a spectator the more we “enlarge” our mind.<sup>99</sup> Where Arendt and Kant differ again goes back to Kant’s insistence on the primacy of the universal over the particular. Kant takes the plurality of the spectator/actor relationship and pushes it further to assume the possibility of a “world spectator.”<sup>100</sup> For Kant, plurality assumes a particular community of people, but he also speaks of “world community” that is naturally universal because it includes all men.<sup>101</sup> In doing so Kant subsumes human plurality to a concept of mankind. Mankind is a universal whole, accessible to the thoughts of pure reason. Kant uses the concept of mankind to assert his belief in progress. Progress disregards the particular and directs its attention at the whole, the universal. For Kant, the whole is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. The particular is dependent on the universal. Kant relates this back to judging because it is the function of judging to take concepts of the universal and apply them to the particular object. As Arendt points out, the judgment, this is a table, implies it is particularly *this* object, while at the same time implying it fits into the universal category of table. Kant always assumed that the universal was superior to the particular where Arendt did not. Thus, at the center of Kant’s concept of history stood the idea of perpetual progress of mankind as a whole. The individual has no place in the idea of mankind. The individual is only part of whole, and thus is not an individual in the sense of being uniquely seen by others. According to Arendt, Kant “understood that the subject of History’s action would have to be Mankind, rather than man or any other verifiable human community.”<sup>102</sup> With this thinking Kant paved the way for Hegel’s concept of a

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 55-56, 104

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 58

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 75

<sup>102</sup> “Willing,” 155

world spirit in history.<sup>103</sup> In the end, Arendt finds Kant to be an eccentric thinker who managed to include both the concept of men in the plural and mankind as a whole in his theory of judgment. In addition, Kant is able to make man as an individual the center of his moral philosophy.<sup>104</sup>

In her *Lectures* Arendt mentions Kant's idea that a man can lose his sense of judgment and still function logically.<sup>105</sup> This notion is very revealing in light of the fact that Eichmann did indeed lose his ability to judge, but never the ability to act competently in his job. In fact, the ability to continually perform his functions as a bureaucrat, without thinking about or judging the consequences, is precisely what made Eichmann such an interesting case. Eichmann's lack of judgment led Arendt to ask herself exactly what kind of conscience he did possess. Arendt writes, "he remembered perfectly well that he would have had a bad conscience only if he had not done what he had been ordered to do—to ship millions of men, women, and children to their death with great zeal and the most meticulous care."<sup>106</sup> Arendt continually asserts that meaning creates conscience. So, for Eichmann to say that he would upset his conscience by failing to obey suggests that for him obedience carried the highest meaning. In another instance Eichmann referred to himself as an "idealist." An idealist, in his mind, was a man who *lived* for an idea, which Arendt concluded Eichmann meant to be a man "who was prepared to sacrifice for his idea everything and, especially, everybody."<sup>107</sup> By Arendt's argument, Eichmann was ready to sacrifice all the Jews in Europe to save his idea of obedience. Once Eichmann made this conviction nothing else had any meaning. He

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<sup>103</sup> *Lectures*, 57-58

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 27, 58

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 64

<sup>106</sup> *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 25

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42

stopped thinking altogether, not just because all he wanted was to obey, but also because he no longer felt the need to give meaning to anything else. Thus, Arendt concludes, all Eichmann could “think” about was obedience. In a discussion of the *Einsatzgruppen* (S.S. killing squads) Arendt argues that the soldiers, if they thought like Eichmann, would not say “What horrible things I did to people!” but instead “What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!”<sup>108</sup> And in fact many members of S.S., Eichmann included, used this justification for their actions. Once Eichmann stopped thinking, he lost the ability to judge as well. The only judgment he could render was towards himself. Did I obey *this* order? Everything else was subsumed to this single judgment. Death and destruction were an unfortunate side-effect that meant he did his job. Arendt also argues that Eichmann’s conscience was reinforced by the fact that others around him felt the same way. “His conscience was indeed set at rest when he saw the zeal and eagerness with which ‘good society’ everywhere reacted as he did.”<sup>109</sup> While on trial Eichmann continually argued that he could find no one who was actually against the Final Solution.<sup>110</sup> The conscience, though affected by others, is an individual organ. The prosecution’s case against Eichmann depended on the fact he never exercised his individual conscience. That is why he is still thought of as a murderer to this day. In looking for Eichmann’s individual conscience Arendt found that he had an initial repulse to the violence and death of the Final Solution, but it did not take long for him to come to terms with it when faced with the proposition of having to disobey orders. She writes, “[Y]es, he had a conscience, and his conscience functioned in the expected way for about

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 106

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 126

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

four weeks, whereupon it began to function the other way around.”<sup>111</sup> Eichmann’s conscience was so warped by the need to obey that when Germany began to fall to its enemies, and other Nazi officials began to abandon the Final Solution, Eichmann refused to stop acting out his orders.<sup>112</sup> So the banality of evil apparent in Eichmann’s actions was how easily he stopped judging once his conscience no longer functioned. In short, the banality of evil is “the abstention from judgment,” when “the self will surrender to the forces of evil rather than exercise autonomous judgment.”<sup>113</sup>

During his examination by Israeli police, however, Eichmann “declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant’s moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty.” Arendt responded by calling Eichmann’s claim “outrageous,” arguing that blind obedience is incompatible with Kant’s moral philosophy.<sup>114</sup> During the trial one of the judges decided to further press Eichmann on his invocation of Kant. Eichmann responded by reciting the categorical imperative, that he acted as though the principle of his will could be the principle of general laws. Eichmann acted on his will to obey, and he thought, surely if anything, obedience should be the principle of law. The very notion of law entails obedience. Kant understood this and asked with the categorical imperative that the individual go beyond the mere obedience entailed in the law. He wanted individuals to be able to identify their own will with the will that initiated the law, as if when they acted they were initiating the law themselves. Eichmann severely misunderstood this point, because his only will was to obey the will of his superiors, especially the will of the Führer. For every action

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 95

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 146

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 113

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 135-136

Eichmann knew that his will was synonymous with the will that initiated the law, because he had already subjugated his will to that of the Führer's. Eichmann tried to argue that he stopped using the categorical imperative once he began to work on the Final Solution, but Arendt accuses him of distorting it instead. According to Arendt, Eichmann used "the categorical imperative of the Third Reich," which meant to "act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your actions, would approve it."<sup>115</sup> Eichmann had no will of his own, so he was incapable of practical reason, which for Kant was the source of law. Without practical reason Kant's categorical imperative is not only useless, but potentially deadly. Eichmann tried to exercise judgment but failed miserably because he was unable to let go of his need to obey, which then allowed him to send millions of men, women, and children to their deaths with a clear conscience.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 136. Hans Frank, a top Nazi official, created the term and its definition.



## CONCLUSION

Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*,

Escape from the frailty of human affairs into the solidity of quiet and order has in fact so much to recommend it that the greater part of political philosophy since Plato could easily be interpreted as various attempts to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics all together.<sup>1</sup>

In modern times this escape from politics found new justification in the rational individualism of the Enlightenment and the emphasis on the introspective self in romanticism. Through her study of Jewish history, totalitarianism, and the French Revolution Arendt came to realize the massive impact that these twin concepts had on European politics. She proposes her notion of human plurality as an antagonist to such thinking in the hope that later scholars could use it to promote genuine political action worldwide. So the question remains: To what extent has she influenced the next generation of thinkers?

Dana Villa suggests that three different schools of thought draw on Arendt's concepts of action and politics. First are the participatory democrats, who, like Arendt, eschew "liberalism's predominantly instrumental conception of politics."<sup>2</sup> Just like Arendt, they believe that politics exists for its own sake, and should not be thought of as a means to any greater notions of social justice.<sup>3</sup> Second are the communitarians, who argue that "the self is not and cannot be a premise of politics."<sup>4</sup> Selfhood, in fact, is attained only in a shared space of common appearance, or in other words, a community.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Human Condition*, 222

<sup>2</sup> Villa, 3

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

“Citizens must be bound together by more than a desire for mutual benefit.”<sup>5</sup> A political community alone can unite them as citizens.

The final school of thought that draws on Arendt’s influence is Critical Theory. Much more so than the other two schools, the relationship between Arendt and Critical Theory is an unusual one. By far the most prominent of the three schools, Critical Theory began with Arendt’s contemporaries at the Institute for Social Research, also known as the Frankfurt School.<sup>6</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm—all influential thinkers in their own right—came together with their Frankfurt School colleagues to create a new tradition of political and social thought. Dealing with many of the same issues coming to light during the first half of the twentieth century, Arendt and the Frankfurt School characterized the modern world in similar ways, which is why many later critical theorists include Arendt among their influences. Villa summarizes their common argument: “As ever-larger areas of social existence are subjected to the dictates of instrumental reason and to the prerogatives of rational administration, the space left for the exercise of citizenship gradually disappears.”<sup>7</sup> Just as Arendt speaks of the dangers of cultural assimilation and mass society, so to do Horkheimer and Adorno speak of a “culture industry” and “mass deception” in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>8</sup> Like Arendt, members of the Frankfurt School attacked the primacy of rational thought established by Cartesian doubt.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>6</sup> For a good history of the Frankfurt School see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1996)

<sup>7</sup> Villa, 5

<sup>8</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94-136

<sup>9</sup> Jay, 61, 122

Yet, for all their similarities, Arendt found many ideas coming from the Frankfurt School detestable. Likewise, her reluctance to accept some of the core ideas developing in Critical Theory, and the fact that she was not a member of the School itself, caused several members to cast her off as an outsider and marginalize her ideas. More than just philosophically, Arendt clashed with the Frankfurt School on a personal level as well. Many of the School's members were Jewish, and thus experienced many of same things she did during the Third Reich. Arendt found many of their personal responses to totalitarianism and anti-Semitism to be offensive, particularly Theodor Adorno, whom Arendt despised.<sup>10</sup> In a letter to Karl Jaspers, in which she asks if the Jews would have gone along with Hitler if he allowed them to, she writes "Adorno certainly would have...he even tried on the basis of his being only half Jewish, but he couldn't pull it off."<sup>11</sup> In another letter, she suggests the possibility that "the Adorno camp" was behind an attack in a German newspaper on her former teacher, Martin Heidegger.<sup>12</sup> She furthers her accusation when personal attacks continued to come at Heidegger in his old age. She writes,

I'm quite convinced that the real people behind the scenes are the Wiesengrund-Adorno<sup>13</sup> crowd in Frankfurt. And that is grotesque, all the more so because it has been revealed (students found this out) that Wiesengrund [Adorno] (a half-Jew and *one of the most repulsive human beings I know*) tried to go along with the Nazis. For years now he and Horkheimer have accused or threatened to accuse anyone in Germany who

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<sup>10</sup> Arendt's personal battle with Adorno started early in her professional career when he blocked her first husband's dissertation proposal. (See Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975*, edited and with an introduction by Carol Brightman, (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1995), p. 206n)

<sup>11</sup> Arendt and Jaspers, *Correspondences*, 593

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 628

<sup>13</sup> Wiesengrund is part of Adorno's full name: Theodor W(iesengrund) Adorno. Arendt calls him Wiesengrund because that is his Jewish name on his father's side, something he wanted to keep quiet. Adorno is his Italian name on his mother's side. (See *Between Friends*, 206n)

was against them of being anti-Semitic. A really disgusting bunch. (emp. added)<sup>14</sup>

Still, Arendt is forced to admit right afterwards that “Wiesengrund [Adorno] is not untalented.” Jaspers, in his response, is equally as assailing. He suggests that Adorno’s attempted cooperation with the Nazis should be more publicly known, but it seems to be kept quiet because he “is becoming something of an authority in the Federal Republic.” He continues, “What a fraud. In what I have read of him, I find nothing worthy of serious consideration.”<sup>15</sup> Arendt explains that Adorno did respond with “an indescribably pathetic letter” that somehow “impressed the Germans a great deal.” She found it additionally revolting that Adorno, “the only half-Jew among Jews,” did not even tell his Jewish friends and colleagues of his attempted collaboration.<sup>16</sup> The only member of the School that Arendt actually befriended was Walter Benjamin, himself somewhat of an outsider, whom she affectionately calls “Benji” in her letters. After Benjamin died trying to escape from Europe, Arendt fought vigorously (and ultimately successfully) to get his manuscript *Theses on the Philosophy of History* published. By chance, she happened to be the only one with a copy of it. In a letter to Heinrich Blücher, she asks him to help her get it published because “that group of bastards” (the Frankfurt School) will try to suppress it.<sup>17</sup> She writes, “I’m all alone and horribly desperate and frightened because they don’t seem willing to print it. And so terribly furious that I could murder that whole lot of them.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Correspondences*, 634

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 638

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 644

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968*, edited and with an introduction by Lotte Kohler, trans. from the German by Peter Constantine (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 72.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Beyond the personal squabbles with the Frankfurt School, Arendt did indeed have genuine philosophical criticisms of Critical Theory. It began with the School's adoption of the word critique. As we have seen, Arendt exalted Kant's notion of critique. The Frankfurt school, however, adopted Marx's notion of critique. In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Arendt explains that Marx's *Capital* was originally called *The Critique of Political Economy*, showing his debt to Kant. Marx, however, equated criticism with *praxis*, or putting theory into action. He called Kant "the philosopher of the French Revolution," because Kant's *theoretical* dismantling of the *ancien regime* had been followed by the French Revolution's *practical* destruction of it.<sup>19</sup> Arendt argues that because Marx rejected philosophy, he came to the conclusion that "reason and philosophical thinking are good for nothing and that 'critique' means destruction, in thought, of whatever it seizes upon, as against Kant's notion of 'critique' as limitation and purification"<sup>20</sup> Critical Theory for the Frankfurt School was Marx's notion of critique, not Kant's (or Arendt's). Thus, their critique of the modern world was ultimately an attempt to destroy it, because as Marxists they still believed in the eventual proletarian revolution. Even in its critique of Marxism itself, Critical Theory wanted to supplant Orthodox Marxism, in essence destroying it. Arendt, though borrowing a great deal from Marx, definitely did not think of herself as a Marxist. She could never align herself with the Frankfurt School because of their allegiance to Marx, even if it was their own unique brand of Marxism.

For all the negativity surrounding Arendt and the Frankfurt School it may seem odd that Dana Villa argues that she is one of the most influential thinkers in the tradition

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<sup>19</sup> *Lectures*, 36

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

of Critical Theory. Villa does not get his argument from the first generation of critical theorists, as they clearly disliked her as much as she hated them. Instead, it was the second generation of critical theorists that took a step back and realized the connections between Arendt and their predecessors. No one did more to integrate Arendt's ideas into the tradition of Critical Theory than Jürgen Habermas. He recognized the common distaste for over-rational and over-individualistic systems of thought in both Arendt and the Frankfurt School. Habermas, however, wanted to show that rationality did not need to be completely destructive when thought of in terms of speech, which he called consensual or dialogical rationality. Such an emphasis on speech drew him to Arendt, and in his own unique way Habermas combined the Marxian ideas of the Frankfurt School with Arendt's notions of speech and action. Dana Villa writes,

Marx's notion of labor as *praxis* conflates acting and making, blinding him to the specificity of the political realm and the peculiar structure of practical discourse...Critical Theory thus found itself at an impasse, which it escaped, so the Habermasian story goes, thanks largely to Hannah Arendt.<sup>21</sup>

Arendt's distinction between acting and making allowed Habermas to distinguish between communicative and instrumental action. He maintains the Marxian notion of material determinism in the economic realm, while at the same time conceiving of politics in terms of communicative action alone.

In developing his own ideas Habermas returned to the Enlightenment era as well. Beginning in the eighteenth century, European society experienced a fundamental change to its social structure. Urbanization spread rapidly, improved technology and transportation allowed for better communication both near and far, and a growing middle class emerging onto the scene for the first time in European history. Habermas called this

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<sup>21</sup> Villa, 5-6

phenomenon “the rise of the public” in his groundbreaking study, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Ever since, the concept of “the rise of the public” has been a cornerstone in eighteenth century historiography. In his *Structural Transformation* Habermas describes how the changing social structure allowed for unprecedented levels of communication, which led to the development of a newly formed public sphere. Coffeehouses, Masonic lodges, and salons—like Rahel’s—served as “public” places where opinions could originate, be discussed, and passed onto others. Habermas’s distinction between private and public spheres echoed Arendt’s own theories on the structures of the private and public realms in *The Human Condition*. Seyla Benhabib even writes, “The very first pages of this work [*Structural Transformation*] reveal the centrality of Habermas’s dialogue with Arendt.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1977, two years after Hannah Arendt’s death, the *Journal of Social Research* devoted an entire issue to analyzing the many different aspects of her thought. Habermas contributed with his article “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power.”<sup>23</sup> He defines the traditional concept of power as “the possibility of forcing one’s own will on the behavior of the others.” Arendt, on the other hand, he argues, rejects such a definition because it describes force, not power. Power, for Arendt, is “the ability to agree upon a common course of action in unconstrained communication.”<sup>24</sup> In *The Human Condition* Arendt continually asserts that power, and not force, maintains the political realm; all attempts to replace power with force only end in disaster for politics.<sup>25</sup> Habermas argues,

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<sup>22</sup> Benhabib, 199. Benhabib follows this with a discussion of Habermas’s concept of a “public sphere” versus Arendt’s concept of “public spaces” (See p. 199-203)

<sup>23</sup> Jurgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power” *Social Research* 44, No. 1 (1977): 3-25

<sup>24</sup> Habermas, 3

<sup>25</sup> *The Human Condition*, 199-206

it is “the mobilization of consent that produces power.” He writes, “Communicative action is the medium for which the intersubjectively shared life-world is formed.”<sup>26</sup>

Communicative action, for both Arendt and Habermas, gives birth to and maintains a free public realm. Drawing from Arendt and the Frankfurt School, Habermas remains suspicious of the possibilities of modern mass society to curtail free and open speech in favor of conditioned behavior, but he offers his concept of communicative action as a possible answer to such dangers.<sup>27</sup>

Arendt is critical of any philosophy that denies human plurality as the basis for politics. The rational individualism of the Enlightenment was no different than the introspection of Romanticism in the fact that both tried to make the individual the measure of all things while at the same time subverting him to universal laws outside his control. In Arendt’s mind, virtually every modern philosopher, from Descartes and Kant to Hegel and Marx, became caught in individualistic web of thinking in some way. It came to define not only modern thought, but also modern society and modern politics as well, bringing with it unprecedented growth and prosperity but also levels of death and destruction never before seen in the history of the world. The goal of Arendt’s thinking is to understand the problems caused by individualistic thinking, and hopefully find an answer to the devastation that it can foster. Through the work of Habermas and others, Arendt’s ideas continue to grow and develop in the twenty-first century, giving them new life with each new thinker.

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<sup>26</sup> Habermas, 8

<sup>27</sup> Bahnbib, 204



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## VITA

Joshua Luke Yoder was born in Albany, Georgia, on April 4, 1983. His father, Robert Yoder, was born into an Amish community in Holmes County, Ohio, in 1948. Although Robert's parents decided to break with the community, taking their nine children with them, they continued to live in Holmes County itself and remained close to their Amish roots. At age 18 Robert left home to join the United States Navy and while stationed in Memphis, Tennessee, he met Joshua's mother, Anna Yockman. Anna was born in 1950 in New York City and raised in the borough of Queens until she met Robert while visiting a friend. After meeting Robert, the two wed and moved to Ohio for a short while. Eventually Robert's work brought him to Georgia, where his four sons, Joshua being the youngest, were born and raised.

Joshua lived in southern Georgia until the age of five, when work caused his father to move once again. Joshua moved with his family to the rural town of Armuchee, a suburb of Rome, in northwest Georgia. There Joshua spent the remainder of his childhood into his early teen years. He attended Glenwood Elementary, the local county school, where he spent several years in the gifted program. In the seventh grade his parents decided to send him to Rome city schools, which could provide a better education than the county schools. He attended Rome Middle School for two years where once again he took advanced classes. He was also on both the wrestling and cross country teams. In fact, he played these two sports every year until graduating from high school. Joshua then attended Rome High School for one year, but the following summer he moved with his family to Calhoun, Georgia, roughly thirty minutes north of the city of Rome.

In Calhoun, Joshua attended Gordon Central High School where he received his diploma with highest honors in 2001. After high school, he wanted to teach history at the high school level himself. As most of his friends chose to enter the military after high school, he did not feel much social pressure to attend a larger university, like the University of Georgia. Instead, he chose to enroll in Reinhardt College, a small liberal arts college in Waleska, Georgia. At Reinhardt, Joshua received the presidential scholarship all four years, which paid for his tuition and room and board in full. He lived on campus during the school year, working for the Social and Behavioral Sciences Department, but came home to Calhoun to work in the summers.

While at Reinhardt Joshua came to the conclusion that he would be much happier teaching college rather than high school. So, instead of pursuing a degree in education, he decided to focus solely on history. Joshua also got to know one of the sociology professors very well, and decided to minor in that field. The combination of sociology, particularly social theory, and history led Joshua to question the structure of society and politics in history. Also bonding with a German historian during his time at Reinhardt led Joshua towards studies in modern Germany. By the time he received in Bachelor of arts in 2005, it was clear to him that he wanted to study German intellectual history, though he still had a very basic understanding of what that entailed.

Joshua made the decision to go onto to graduate school when he decided he wanted to teach college as a career. His senior year at Reinhardt he looked at several colleges in the Southeastern United States. He found several professors at Louisiana State University doing research in areas he found interesting, and after being accepted in the graduate program, he decided to attend the university. At Louisiana State University,

Joshua increased his overall knowledge of history by vast amounts. When it came time to choose his thesis topic he remembered a book he read the summer after graduating from Reinhardt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt was assigned in one of his classes at Reinhardt, but the professor felt it was too complex for the students and told them they did not have to read it. Joshua, however, having already purchased the book, held onto it, and decided to read it on his own. Having enjoyed the book and felt intellectually stimulated, he decided to make Hannah Arendt the focus of his thesis work. From there he set out learn all he could about Hannah Arendt, and found that in doing so he had to learn the entire philosophical tradition from Plato to Habermas. Thus, by the time the thesis was completed he not only had internalized a massive amount of historical data, but also an entirely new set of ideas in politics and philosophy. With such a mental investment, Joshua then realized that a career in intellectual history would require a great deal more learning and understanding. Therefore, he has chosen to take a few years off in between his master's and doctorate to further internalize all the new ideas he encountered in the past several years. Before returning to school he plans to teach freshman level Western Civilization courses for a few years to both gain teaching experience and to sharpen his historical knowledge. His commitment to intellectual history is stronger than ever, but he realizes that it is quite an undertaking, one that will take many years, possibly even a lifetime, to fully grasp all the nuances of such a complex field: a lifetime he is most willing to devote.