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**Nature versus Freedom:
Hannah Arendt's Theory of the Political Sphere
from the *Polis* to the Modern World**

Eric Mendelsohn

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in the
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of
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Abstract

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Eric Mendelsohn

My thesis bears on Hannah Arendt's theory of the political sphere. My objective is critically to assess Arendt's development of the theory from its introduction in her treatment of the self-understanding of the ancient Greek *polis* to its deployment in the modern context. With The Human Condition as the central text in my analysis, I consider the key philosophical-theoretical commitments surrounding the theory of the political sphere, notably Arendt's opposition of freedom to nature. I argue that problems arising in connection with Arendt's theory of the political sphere can be traced to the freedom-nature dichotomy.

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Abbreviations

HC Arendt, Hannah The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989)

OR Arendt, Hannah On Revolution (London: Penguin, 1990)

OV Arendt, Hannah On Violence (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970)

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Finally, I want to salute Jennifer Bartz, who rocks.

**Introduction:
Hannah Arendt's Theory of the Political Sphere**

Hannah Arendt's interest in politics and political space hardly begins with The Human Condition. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a grosser distortion of Arendt's intellectual biography: a concern with politics and political space is central to her landmark The Origins of Totalitarianism, written a decade earlier. Any attempt to trace the development of Arendt's political thought, or more specifically, of her conception of political space, over the course of her intellectual career, would have to reach much farther back than The Human Condition. Notwithstanding the considerable merits of this type of endeavor, however, I have undertaken a far more narrowly circumscribed project. My thesis bears on Hannah Arendt's theory of the political sphere as it is introduced in The Human Condition and developed in her subsequent books On Revolution and On Violence. When I refer to "Arendt's theory of the political sphere," my meaning will be "the theory of the political sphere as introduced in The Human Condition and developed on that basis."

Though Arendt's interest in politics and political space precedes her authorship of The Human Condition, this book marks an important milestone in her political- philosophical thought:¹ Arendt theorizes politics and the political sphere from the standpoint of human ontology. (This is in sharp contrast to Arendt's

¹ Of course, The Human Condition can be approached from many perspectives. In the present context, I approach it through the prism of my interest in Arendt's theory of the political sphere, rather than from

approach to politics and political space in The Origins of Totalitarianism.) My decision to focus on the theory of the political sphere as it emerges from The Human Condition reflects my sense that its characteristic human-ontological approach to politics and the political sphere represents a turning point in Arendt's political thought. For the first time in her intellectual career, Arendt's account of the political is connected to, grows out of, an account of fundamental human potentialities.

These potentialities are realized through certain characteristic activities. These characteristic activities, in turn, are associated with "spheres," or "realms." The basic spheres of human activity—the household, social and political spheres—are central to Arendt's account, and to the present analysis. Arendt's treatment of the various spheres operates against the background of her conception of the public and private realms. (There is no difference in meaning between a "sphere" and a "realm" in Arendt's thought: the terms are synonymous. I have preferred the expression "sphere," except when one sphere contains or encompasses another, in which case I have used the expression "realm." Thus, I speak of the political "sphere," but locate it within the public "realm." Though this preference does not reflect systematic or principled commitments on my part, it is not entirely arbitrary: where possible, I have tried to harmonize the terminology of my thesis with that prevalent in the social- and

the standpoint of, e.g., an inquiry into Arendt's critique of Marx, or her interpretation of the significance of the Reformation.

political- philosophical critical literature; there, the expression “sphere” is preferred.²⁾

The most exalted sphere of human activity, the sphere associated with man’s realization of his greatest potential, is the political sphere, which Arendt consistently refers to as the “sphere of freedom.” One of the central tasks in this thesis will be the exposition of the relation between politics and the political sphere, on the one hand, and the human capacity for action, on the other. The relation between action, politics and freedom is at the centre of The Human Condition. It is worth noting that Arendt’s conception of the political sphere is such that it is always located in the public realm: properly speaking, Arendt theorizes a political public sphere. There is no such thing as a non-public, or private, political sphere in Arendt’s thought. (This is emphatically not to say that the public and political spheres are identical, however. This non-identity is reflected most strikingly in Arendt’s well-known treatment of the “rise of the social,” which is the object of the second chapter of my thesis, which centers on the idea that public space is colonized by “the social” under conditions of modernity.³

) An adequate treatment of Arendt’s theory of the political sphere necessarily involves an account of its relation to the household and social spheres. An explanation of the household and social spheres, in turn, requires attention to their constitutive activities, which are oriented towards dealing with, and ultimately overcoming, nature. Arendt’s concept of nature thus requires attention as well.

² The seminal work in this tradition is almost certainly Jürgen Habermas’s The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Seyla Benhabib, who has given Arendt’s work a great deal of attention, is a major figure in this discussion.

I do not want to give a definition of Arendt's theory of the political sphere at this early juncture. Rather, the first four chapters of this thesis are intended as a progressive clarification of it: I proceed by tracing the development of Arendt's theory of the political sphere from its introduction in her discussion of the ancient Greek *polis* to its re-deployment in the modern context. Of course, this approach reflects a major interpretive-theoretical assumption of my part: that Arendt's conception of politics and the political sphere under the conditions of the ancient Greek *polis* is continuous with her concept of politics and the political sphere under conditions of modernity. Formulated negatively, my claim is that Arendt does not operate with two or more concepts of the political sphere, such that one operates in the polis, and figures in her treatment of modernity.⁴ In positive terms, my central claim is that the basic theoretical commitments determining Arendt's subsequent treatment of the political sphere under conditions of modernity are introduced in her interpretation of the self-understanding of the ancient Greek *polis*. The demonstration of this claim is one of my principal tasks in this thesis.

Arendt's position is not such that she advocates a return to the *polis*. Rather, Arendt's self-understanding is such that she looks to the *polis* in order to shed light on, to clarify, the meaning of politics and the political sphere; this clarification is the basis for her diagnosis of modern times with respect to politics and the political sphere. My claim that Arendt uses a single theory to render politics both in ancient

³ Marie Canovan argues, unconvincingly in my view, for a very broad interpretation of Arendt's conception of the public sphere, such that it becomes nearly synonymous with "culture."

⁴ Seyla Benhabib effectively endorses the "two concepts" position. I argue against Benhabib's position in this thesis.

Greece and under modern conditions should not be understood as an assertion that Arendt operates under the illusion that there are no meaningful differences between these periods from the standpoint of politics. Stated at a greater level of specificity, my central claim is that Arendt retains the basic conceptual apparatus introduced in her discussion of the *polis*, but subjects her theory to three successive reformulations; these constitute a gradual development of the theory of the political sphere under conditions of modernity.

In the first chapter of my thesis (“Arendt on the political self-understanding of the ancient Greeks: the household and political spheres,”) I undertake a close examination of Arendt’s treatment in The Human Condition of the political self-understanding of the ancient Greek *polis*. I represent Arendt’s formulations of both the political and household spheres. I show that the opposition of the political sphere, constituted by speech and action, to the household sphere, constituted by activities oriented towards the satisfaction of necessity, assumes a central position in Arendt’s political-philosophical thought. In this first chapter, I do the expository groundwork which makes it possible, in the three subsequent chapters, to track the development of Arendt’s account into a theory of the modern political sphere.

The next three chapters of my thesis consist in an examination of Arendt’s treatment of the political sphere under conditions of modernity. As I have already indicated, the basic conceptual commitments introduced in the *polis* discussion determine Arendt’s theory of the modern political sphere, which is developed through three successive reformulations. I give an account of each of these reformulations,

which arise in connection with: Arendt's treatment of the "rise of the social" (I); her theory of "world" (II); and her treatment of the French and American Revolutions on the basis of the theory of power (III). (These make up the second, third and fourth chapters of my thesis, respectively.) I try to show that each of these reformulations of the theory of the political sphere reproduces the basic opposition between nature and freedom at the heart of Arendt's social and political thought.

Thus, in the second chapter (The Political Sphere and Modernity (I): the Rise of the Social") I consider Arendt's formulation of the social sphere, which is at once the centerpiece of her conception of modernity and her first statement of the threat to the political sphere. I draw attention to the close link between Arendt's conception of the social sphere and her earlier treatment of the household sphere on the grounds of her theory of nature.

In the third chapter ("The Political Sphere and Modernity (II): the Theory of "World""), I consider Arendt's second formulation of the political sphere under modern conditions, this time through philosophical anthropology and the theory of "world." With the theory of world, the political sphere is theorized on the basis of the human capacity for reification, which also figures as the source of the second threat to the political sphere. Again, Arendt's account features the opposition between nature and freedom as its central element.

In the fourth chapter ("The Political Sphere and Modernity (III): the Theory of Power"), I look beyond The Human Condition to her books On Revolution and On Violence. These books operate on the basis of the categories and conceptual apparatus introduced in The Human Condition. I am particularly interested in On

Revolution, where Arendt re-theorizes the political public sphere on the basis of the theory of power, through a contrast between the American and French revolutions. (This move is already signaled in The Human Condition, but is only fleshed out in On Revolution.) I also consider On Violence, where Arendt gives explicitly theoretical expression to the concepts deployed in On Revolution.

In the three previous chapters, my objective was to represent Arendt's progressive development of the theory of the political public sphere under conditions modernity. I took her discussion of the ancient Greek polis as a starting point, and tracked the transformation of the theory through each of the three phases I identified: the initial formulation of the rise of the social (I), the introduction of reification and production in the theory of world (II), and the restatement of the theory of the political sphere through the theory of power (III).

At this juncture, I want to consider Arendt's theory of the political public sphere from a different standpoint. Whereas my initial perspective was analytical-exegetic—my objective was to represent and explain Arendt's theoretical commitments—I now want to turn to the question of their plausibility. In this final chapter of my thesis, I want to demonstrate some crucial problems arising in connection with Arendt's theory of the political sphere.

Specifically, I want to show that: Arendt's categorical distinction between the social and the political spheres (mirroring the distinction between the household and political spheres) is implausible (i); that her conception of both the household and social spheres, generated on the basis of her theory of nature, is implausible (ii); that her conception of politics and the political sphere, purged as it is of "the social" (that

which ought to belong in the household sphere) is one-dimensional, inadequate (iii); and that Arendt's basic commitments with respect to the political sphere reflect her identification with the (retrospective) perspective of a powerful, emancipated group, whether or not it constitutes a "ruling class" as such, and have the consequence of rendering invisible, or mute, a series of crucial political claims, particularly those surrounding the vital question of access to the political sphere (iv). In the second part of this chapter, I argue that many of the problems to which I have alluded—and whose demonstration is the business of the first part of the chapter—can be traced to Arendt's basic epistemological and methodological commitments.

Chapter One

Arendt on the self-understanding of the ancient Greeks: the household and political spheres

Arendt's conception of politics and the political sphere is, to a great extent, imbedded in her discussion of the ancient Greek *polis*. Indeed, the term "*polis*" could be replaced by the longer expression "political sphere under the conditions of ancient Greece" without any appreciable change in meaning. The concepts deployed in Arendt's discussion of the *polis* form the basis for her normative political-theoretical claims, and for her critique of modernity (expressed as a critique of the "rise of the social.") Indeed, some of the crucial elements in Arendt's conception of politics and the political sphere are never taken up explicitly elsewhere in her work; an analysis of Arendt's conception of the political sphere, even under conditions of modernity, must pass through an examination of her interpretation of the political sphere under the conditions of ancient Greece.⁵

In what follows, I will seek to represent Arendt's interpretation of the political self-understanding of the ancient Greeks. My interest is emphatically not in the evaluation of Arendt's interpretation of Greek political thought, but in its exposition.⁶ Thus, I will not try to assess, e.g., whether Arendt "gets Aristotle

⁵ The demonstration of the relation of Arendt's account of the *polis* to her treatment of the political sphere under conditions of modernity is one of the central tasks of the present thesis.

⁶ Some critics have engaged Arendt on this level. Sheldon Wolin charges that Arendt seeks to authorize her own political-philosophical claims on the grounds that they are reflected in her distorted interpretation of the *polis*. Writes Wolin: "It is difficult to exaggerate either the severity

right,” or whether her historical or sociological claims about the *polis* stand up to scrutiny. Rather, I want to clarify Arendt’s interpretation of Greek thought as a preliminary step in a critical examination of her own political-philosophical thought. Of course, Arendt’s interpretation of the Greeks and her own claims are often indistinguishable; her procedure is, generally, to assert that the Greeks (as she understands them) got it right.⁷ Thus, her interpretation of, e.g., the Greek conception of the household sphere’s relation to the political sphere is always accompanied by the (implicit or explicit) claim that the relation was appropriately formulated by the Greeks. In any case, when I refer to “Arendt’s account” of, e.g., the household sphere in ancient Greece, the expression will be shorthand for: “Arendt’s interpretation of the political self-understanding of the Greeks on the subject of the household sphere, the basic terms of which are retained in her political philosophy.” (The question of whether, and in what sense, Arendt is

with which she [Arendt] drew boundaries around the political in order separate it from the banality and low concerns of everyday life, or the historical distortions which had to be introduced in order to claim for her construct the authority of the Greeks. Among the distortions she ignored the acute class conflicts that were a familiar feature of the Greek city-states and had generated continuous pressure for the broadening of citizenship and for the enlargement of political access so that excluded social elements might enjoy the benefits of political membership. As a result she gave us politics without the divisive conflicts that have presented the main challenge to politicians, just as she had given us what was said to be a Greek-inspired conception of action but without analyzing the vital place accorded violence and war in Greek conceptions of the polis and of noble action.” (Wolin, p.293) Judith A. Swanson, in her book The Public and the Private in Aristotle’s Political Philosophy, challenges Arendt’s interpretation of Aristotle on the grounds that she grossly misrepresents the *polis*-household relation. Without even realizing that she is voicing a criticism of Arendt, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin writes: “Nor can Arendt have failed to know that politics has always dealt importantly with social and economic matters, even in the *polis*.” (Pitkin 1994, p.276) Arendt certainly did fail to know this: the point is central to Arendt’s interpretation of the *polis*. For Wolin, cf. “Democracy and the Political” in Hinchman and Hinchman, eds. Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays Albany: SUNY Press, 1994. pp. 289-306. For Pitkin, cf. “Justice: On Relating Private and Public” in the same anthology, pp. 261-288. For Swanson, cf. The Public and the Private in Aristotle’s Political Philosophy, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992.

⁷ Arendt employs essentially the same procedure in her treatment of the self-understanding of the American Revolution; cf. pp. 60 ff. of this thesis.

nostalgic for the *polis* is controversial in the Arendt literature⁸; I want to defend the claim that Arendt is nostalgic for the **concepts** of the *polis*.)

Having emphasized the close connection between Arendt's interpretation of the *polis* and her own political-philosophical commitments, I want also to note that her description of the *polis* is not simply carried over into her analysis of "the political" under conditions of modernity. The relationship of her treatment of the *polis* to her treatment of the modern political sphere is problematic, and must be drawn into focus. I will give the question of the relation of politics and the political sphere in ancient Greece to politics and the political sphere under conditions of modernity explicit attention starting in the next chapter. In this first chapter, I want to represent Arendt's interpretation-construction of the political sphere in ancient Greece; in subsequent chapters, I will try to clarify the role played by this interpretation-construct in Arendt's treatment of the political sphere under conditions of modernity, descriptively and normatively.

Household vs. political spheres

The decisive move in Arendt's formulation of the political sphere under the conditions of ancient Greece is its separation from the household sphere. The basic categories in Arendt's social and political thought—including the outline of

⁸ Habermas argues that Arendt is nostalgic for the polis. In his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he writes: "Since the Renaissance this model of the Hellenic public sphere, as handed down to us in the stylized form of Greek self-interpretation, has shared with everything else considered "classical" a peculiarly normative power." (STPS, p.4) He cites *The Human Condition* as the most recent (as of 1962) such attempt. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994. Seyla Benhabib argues against this interpretation of Arendt. I will devote some attention to Benhabib's argument below. Cf. pp. 85 ff. of this thesis.

her conception of the social sphere and her analysis of “society” under conditions of modernity—come into play in Arendt’s description of the household and political spheres, and in her elucidation of the difference between them.

An account of Arendt’s interpretation of the *polis*—the political sphere under the conditions of ancient Greece—cannot proceed directly, but must pass through an examination of her conception of the household sphere. In a certain sense, Arendt’s account of the *polis* is parasitic on her account of the household sphere. Emphasizing the distinction between the political and household spheres, Arendt writes:

According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association [the household] whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family. (HC p.24)

While the political and household spheres are opposed, mutually exclusive on the level of their contents, the household sphere nonetheless plays a crucial role in the constitution of the political sphere. Though the political sphere does not coincide with the household sphere, it nevertheless depends on it: the household stands as a necessary—though by no means sufficient—condition for the *polis*. The household sphere is not just non-political, but **pre-political**.⁹ Thus, it is important not only to separate conceptually the household and political spheres, but to give an account of their relation.

⁹ This question comes into sharp focus in chapter four (“The political sphere and modernity (III): the theory of power.”)

The household sphere emerges as a function of the most basic requirement: individual and species survival and reproduction. Forced to consociate by the need to survive, human beings constitute a household sphere.¹⁰

Arendt writes:

The distinctive trait of the household sphere was that in it men lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs. **The driving force was life itself... which, for its individual maintenance and its survival as the life of the species needs the company of others.** (HC, p.30) (bold mine)

By way of a provisional definition of the household, we can say that it represents the basic unit of organization in the human struggle to satisfy the biological requirements of life. The household sphere is thus oriented toward the “mastering of necessity, a problem which arises on the level of “nature.” Arendt’s concept of “nature,” developed in tandem with “life” (or “life itself,” the “life-process”) “necessity,” is crucial in her political thought. At this early stage, it is sufficient to note that Arendt’s theory of the political public sphere is rooted in her conceptions of “life,” “nature,” and the primordality of basic survival imperatives unmediated by human decisions, intentions or goals. Prior to the introduction of human ends and purposes into the world, nature’s requirements—the irreducible demands of the biological organism— must be satisfied; this satisfaction is the object of the household sphere.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note the contrast with Hobbes. In Hobbes, the “...condition of Man... is a condition of Warre of every one against every one... And therefore, as long as this naturall Right of every man to everything endureth, there can be no security for any man.” (p.190.) In Hobbes, the state of nature is associated with the radical autonomy of all men, with an “every man for himself” condition. In Arendt, existence in the sphere of nature forces men together.

Arendt's conception of the household sphere is such that "nature" determines not only the purpose of the household (i.e., securing the biological requirements of human life, e.g., food and shelter,) but also its organizational form. Thus, the division of labor obtaining in the household is derived from "nature." She writes:

That individual maintenance should be the task of the man and species survival the task of the woman was obvious, and both **these natural functions**, the labor of man to provide nourishment and the labor of the woman in giving birth, were subject to the same urgency of life. (HC, p.30) (bold mine)

Arendt's reference to "natural functions" is important to note. Here, Arendt does not just describe the Greek political self-understanding, but is revealing her own theoretical commitments. (This will come into clearer focus the next three chapters of my thesis.) The respective roles of women and slaves in the household reflect their "naturally obvious" functions in relation to the imperatives of the life-cycle: reproduction and toil, respectively. Further, the norms regulative of the household are derived from "nature" and "necessity:" "[n]atural community in the household therefore was born of necessity, and necessity ruled over all the activities performed in it." (HC, p.30) At play here is, in effect, the view that the household sphere operates according to "rules of nature" which seem "obvious" to the ancient Greeks. As I will demonstrate in connection with her treatment of

politics under the conditions of modernity, Arendt's self-understanding is such that the "rules of nature" are somehow knowable by her as well.¹¹

So far, I have represented Arendt's account of the household in its etiological dimension, such that the household sphere arises necessarily as a function of the "natural" survival imperative. However, there is a second dimension in Arendt's account: the household sphere is oriented not only toward the satisfaction of the "demands of nature," but also toward **emancipation** from nature. Ultimately, what is at issue in the household sphere is not just compromise with nature, i.e., survival and reproduction given the "rules of nature," but **escape** from nature. This second dimension is the dominant strain in Arendt's treatment of the household sphere. In the first movement, the household is portrayed as dedicated to coping with necessity, and operates within it; in the second, principal, movement, the household is portrayed as the means for stepping out of the realm of necessity altogether.¹² (Arendt's self-understanding is **not** that there are two strains, or dimensions, in her treatment of the household sphere; the claim is mine.)

By no means is the household sphere in ancient Greece dedicated to the wholesale emancipation of human beings from nature. Rather, the household sphere is geared towards the emancipation from nature of a select few men: the

¹¹ I return to this question in the fifth chapter of this thesis. Cf. pp. 79 ff.

¹² Pitkin overlooks the first tendency in Arendt's account entirely: "The household was a "pre-political realm," a necessary prerequisite for citizenship, but strictly a means to that higher end. [The]... household was ruled by domination and force, by a *despotes*, while *polis* life was carried on through speech and reason." (Pitkin 1994, p.265) Only from the vantage point of the *despotes* destined for the political sphere can the household appear as "strictly a means to that higher end," the *polis*.

masters of the households. The household may come into being “of necessity.” since the imperatives of individual and species survival throw people together, ultimately, however, the household is structured to allow its master—and no one else—to “step out of nature.” In its second, dominant, dimension, Arendt’s account is such that escape from necessity **for the master** is the outcome of the master’s successful administration of the household.

In contrast with her first, etiological, account, Arendt now cites **entry into the political sphere** as the ultimate purpose of the household sphere:

Without mastering the necessities of life in the household, neither life nor the “good life” is possible, but politics is never for the sake of life. **As far as the members of the *polis* are concerned, household life exists for the sake of the good life in the *polis*.** (HC, p. 37) (bold mine)

Thus, Arendt’s emphasis shifts to an account of the household sphere from the standpoint of an examination of the existential requirements of the political sphere. In this perspective, Arendt gives theoretical expression to the retrospective perspective of those who have access to the political sphere. The point can be made “from the other side.” clearly, the household sphere does not have any nature-emancipatory significance for those members of the household—viz., women and slaves—for whom there can be no hope of stepping into the “realm of the *polis*.” (It is worth noting that Arendt does not explore this other perspective.)

Legitimacy and the household sphere

At this juncture, I want to identify the question of the **legitimacy of the form of the household sphere**, though I want to postpone a thorough examination of it. The household sphere may arise “naturally” in response to “necessity,” but under the conditions of ancient Greece, it is administered so as to provide certain men—the citizens—with the means to step into the political sphere. Essentially, the citizens are the beneficiaries of a system of domination geared towards the realization of their freedom. (I will proceed with the explication of Arendt’s conception of freedom, which is at the heart of her conception of politics and the political sphere, below.) What can be said about the legitimacy of this arrangement? Arendt effectively straddles two positions about the legitimacy of the form of the household sphere in ancient Greece:

1) in the household sphere, everything is permitted, since the only rules in force are the rules of nature. The survival imperative, expressed on the level of necessity and the biological requirements of life, is the only relevant principle. The “necessities of life” have priority over all other considerations.

2) the value of the *polis*, which depends on the system of domination expressed in the household sphere, justifies anything that is necessary in relation to it.

The following claim embodies both strains in Arendt’s position:

What all Greek philosophers, no matter how opposed to the *polis* life, took for granted is that freedom is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is necessarily a prepolitical

phenomenon, characteristic of the private household organization, and that force and violence are necessary in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity— for instance, by ruling over slaves— and to become free. **Because all human beings are subject to necessity, they are entitled to violence towards others; violence is the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of the world.** (HC, p.31)

I will return to the question of the legitimacy of the form of the household in chapters four and five. (This issue becomes particularly important in Arendt's On Revolution: there, the achievement of the conditions for politics is theorized as a technical-administrative problem to be solved by experts, non-political (even if pre-political) through and through.)

Freedom and the political sphere

Arendt refers to the *polis*— the political sphere under the conditions of ancient Greece— as the “realm of freedom.” It is important not to confuse emancipation from nature, achieved in the household sphere, with the realization of freedom proper, which is possible only in the political sphere. The expression “negative freedom” can be used to describe the pre-political goal of the household sphere, so long as it is recognized that Arendt usually uses the term “freedom” in a different connection. Usually, Arendt speaks of “freedom” in connection with the political sphere: at issue is a positive, substantive conception of freedom. “Negative freedom”— understood, once again, as emancipation from nature (rather than from the thrall of other men)— is achieved in and through the household, and is a prerequisite for entry into the political sphere. Only in the

political sphere can “positive freedom” be realized. When I use the term “freedom” without qualification, the reference will be to positive freedom, the freedom which is always and necessarily located in the political sphere. Arendt writes:

The realm of the *polis* ... was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres [i.e., between the household and political spheres], it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for the freedom of the *polis*. (HC, pp.30-31)

The claim that the “realm of the *polis*” is the “sphere of freedom” is key to Arendt’s political thought.

Arendt consistently emphasizes the strict separation of the political and household spheres. Indeed, this is one of the many elements of Greek political thought the loss of which Arendt laments in her reflection on politics under conditions of modernity.¹³ This strict conceptual separation—which, I will argue in chapter five, has unfortunate consequences for Arendt’s political philosophy—is established on the level of the activities constitutive of each of the spheres. While the household sphere plays a crucial role in the constitution of the political sphere, there is no point of intersection between the respective spheres on the level of their contents: the activities characteristic of the household sphere have no place in the political sphere. Arendt writes:

At the root of Greek political consciousness, we find an unequaled clarity and articulateness in drawing this distinction. **No activity that served only the purpose of making a living, of sustaining**

¹³ At the centre of this reflection is Arendt’s formulation and analysis of the “rise of the social.” Cf. Chapters 2 and 4 of this thesis for a discussion of the relationship between the “household” and “social” spheres.

only the life process, was permitted to enter the political realm... (HC, p.37)

In positive terms, Arendt specifies those activities— speech and action— exclusively constitutive of the political sphere:

Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the *bios politikos*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*), out of which rises the realm of human affairs... from which everything merely necessary or useful strictly excluded. (Arendt HC, pp.24-25)

Life-sustaining activities belong to the household sphere, while speech and action— the only inherently political activities— belong to the political sphere. Action and speech do not just play a privileged role in the political sphere: they are constitutive of it. As will become clear as my exposition of Arendt's account continues, her conceptions of the political sphere (or *polis*, in this context,) of freedom, and of action continually overlap, refer to and depend on each other. It should be kept in mind that the political sphere does not describe the set of all instances of action and speech; rather, the political sphere denotes a way of life based on action and speech. In Arendt's conception, to inhabit the political sphere is to participate in a way of life founded on speech and action. To a significant degree, the exposition of Arendt's conception of the political sphere consists in a description of the way of life founded on action and speech.

In order fully to appreciate Arendt's sense of the significance of the political way of life, founded on speech and action, it is appropriate to give additional attention to Arendt's conception of nature. I have already written that the household sphere makes it possible for certain men— citizens— to “step out

of nature,” thereby enabling them to “step into” the political sphere; what is it, though, that can uniquely be accomplished in the political sphere? Life on the level of nature— “life itself”— is “essentially futile,” in Arendt’s conception. On the level of nature, life is synonymous with the “life process,” characterized by flux, impermanence. Life must be reclaimed from the life-cycle, rededicated, given human purposes. Arendt expresses this accomplishment— of moving beyond the transience and futility of nature, of life itself— as the achievement of “earthly immortality,” realizable exclusively in and through a political sphere. Against the fleeting character of life on the level of nature, the *polis* affords the possibility of an enduring, permanent **human**— rather than “natural”— life.

Arendt writes:

For the *polis* was for the Greeks, as the *res publica* was for the Romans, first of all their guarantee against the futility of individual life, the space protected against this futility and reserved for the relative permanence, if not immortality, of mortals. (HC, p.56)

The political sphere, in sharp contrast to the household sphere, is characterized by the total absence of the relation of “rulership.” This does not signify only that, qua members of the political sphere, citizens are not **subject** to rulership, but also that they do not **exercise** it. The only relation appropriate to the political sphere is equality. Arendt writes:

The *polis* was distinguished from the household in that it knew only “equals,” whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality. To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled. Thus within the realm of the household, freedom did not exist, for the household head, its ruler, was considered only to be free only

insofar as he had the power to leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals. (HC, p.32)

Arendt insists that equality in the polis is by no means implied a reduction of differences between citizens. On the contrary, the life of the *polis* is characterized by the attempt by its members to distinguish themselves from each other, to outshine each other. Honour, glory, achievement— these are at the heart of the political life; what is required is that these be accomplished before, witnessed and recognized by, **equals**.

Arendt considers that the *polis* constitutes the most individualistic form of political life ever to have existed. She is at pains to separate the ideal of equality she ascribes to the polis to the notion of equality-as-conformity which she associates with the rise of modernity. (I will return to this question below, in an examination of Arendt's account of the "rise of the social," the chief characteristic of modernity; in her conception, the "rise of the social" is associated with the rise of "behaviour" and the decline of action, which is also a decline of the political.) Arendt writes:

... [M]odern equality, based on the conformism inherent in society and possible only because behaviour has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship, is in every respect different from equality in antiquity, and notably in the Greek city-states. To belong to the few "equals" (*homoioi*) meant to be permitted to live among one's peers; but the public realm itself, the *polis*, was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all (*aien aristeuein*). **The public realm, in other words, was reserved for individuality; it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were.** (HC, p.41) (bold mine)

The tight relationship between Arendt's conceptions of politics and the political sphere, freedom and action comes into focus in the paragraph cited above. Having claimed that the *polis* is characterized by extreme individualism, driven by a "fiercely agonal spirit," she also claims that the *polis* is the "only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were." With this claim, Arendt affirms the freedom-*polis*-action circle central to her interpretation of the political sphere under the conditions of ancient Greece, and to her own thought.

To say that the political sphere is the sphere of action—the sphere in which action belongs, is at home, as it were—is also to say that human self-realization must necessarily occur in the political sphere. Put differently: only in the political sphere can I become who I truly am. An examination of Arendt's conception of action as "who-disclosive" helps to understand how this is so. She writes:

In acting and speaking, men show who they truly are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is— his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide— is implicit in everything somebody says and does. (HC, p.179) (bold mine)

The development of individuality, of selfhood, is thus achieved through action. Human identity, uniqueness, are achieved through speech and action. This speech and action-based process of self-development, of individuation, is both constitutive of and dependent on the political sphere. We have already seen that the political sphere is sustained by, emergent from, the way of life based on

speech and action; Arendt now adds that speech and action themselves depend on a political sphere in which they can be housed:

Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent along with the act, action needs for its full appearance ... the public realm. (HC, p.180)

Indeed, Arendt represents the realization of what I have called genuine “who-ness” as the very purpose of the *polis*:

The *polis* was supposed to multiply the occasions to win “immortal fame,” that is, to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word what he was in his unique distinctness. (HC, p.197)

Arendt expresses the relationship of mutual dependence between action and the political sphere in terms of a “web of human relationships.” She writes that:

The realm of human affairs, strictly speaking, consists of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together. The disclosure of the “who” through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. (HC, p.184)

Arendt’s conception of politics and the political sphere is thus “ontological,” since it grounds them in a theory of human being, and the conditions for the realization of its peculiar— political— potential. One becomes who one is— the “who” that one is— through speech and action; speech and action are possible exclusively in the political sphere. Of course, the question arises: what happens, on the level of “who-formation” to those without access to the sphere of action?

The inability to sustain a way of life based on speech and action entails both exclusion from the political sphere, and an inability to achieve a genuine

“whoness” (however described, whether in terms of “true” human being, unimpaired subjectivity, authentic self-realization, etc.) Consider Arendt’s remark about the relation of “slaves and barbarians” to the *polis* in the ancient Greek political self-understanding:

... Aristotle only formulated the current opinion of the *polis* about man and the political way of life, and according to this opinion, everybody outside the *polis*— slaves and barbarians— was *aneu logou*, deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other. (HC, p.27)

(In subsequent chapters, as we turn our attention from the self-understanding of the ancient Greeks to the modern world, the question becomes, what becomes of those for whom the political sphere, the sphere of action, is inaccessible?)

As we saw above, Arendt stresses the role of the political sphere—the “web of human relationships”— in **receiving** speech and action, in somehow housing them. Arendt’s remarks about the “futility” of speech and action help to clarify and to flesh out this role. Her conception is such that speech and action, of themselves, are fleeting, have no permanence. The endurance of speech and action—the transcendence of their futility— depends on their subsistence in and through the web of human relationships (constitutive of the political sphere) through memory, stories, the speech and action of others. Thus, one of the basic conditions of political life is the co-presence and participation of others, of other

speakers and actors: the political sphere requires that acts and words appear to others, and that they be taken up again by others. Arendt writes:

[Another...] function of the *polis*, again closely connected with the hazards of action as experienced before its coming into being, was to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech: for the chances that a deed deserving of fame would not be forgotten, that it actually would become “immortal,” were not very good. (HC, p.196)

And:

In other words, men’s life together in the form of the *polis* seemed to assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made “products,” the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable. (HC, pp.197-98)

Arendt’s reference to speech and action as “products” (with quotation marks) anticipates her treatment of the political sphere under conditions of modernity through the categories of production and reification in her theory of “world.” There, Arendt theorizes the need for the reification of speech and action (on the model of the production of things) in order to constitute and sustain a permanent, enduring world of human affairs; there, she refers to speech and action as products, effectively taking away the quotation marks.

In the next three chapters, I want to turn my attention to Arendt’s treatment of politics and the political sphere under conditions of modernity. One of the main points that I will seek to establish is that, in her treatment of modernity, Arendt never discards— nor does she significantly revise— the basic theoretical apparatus deployed in her analysis and interpretation of the ancient Greek *polis*. I propose to track Arendt’s development of the theory of the

political public sphere under conditions of modernity through three stages, showing at every stage that she retains the basic concepts at play in the *polis* discussion. (Diagrams representing the developments constitutive of the three stages against the background of the basic categories, follow my exposition of each of the stages.)

Chapter Two

The political sphere and modernity (I): the rise of the social

From the ancient Greek World to the Modern World

With Arendt's treatment of the "rise of the social," we move from the ancient Greek world (as seen through an Arendtian lens,) to the modern world. The question arises: What is the relevance of an examination of politics and the political sphere under the conditions of ancient Greece for a reflection on the political sphere in the modern context? Or, more precisely: What, for Arendt, is the connection between the examination of the self-understanding of the *polis* and her analysis and critique of modernity? I do not propose to attempt a final answer to this question at this early juncture; rather, the next three chapters are intended as a progressive answer to it. I attempt a sort of final answer, or summary of the progressive answer, in the final chapter of my thesis, "Arendt's Theory of the Political Sphere: a Critique."

Unlike many thinkers—Lyotard and Habermas are perhaps the most prominent examples¹⁴—Arendt does not theorize modernity as such. For Arendt, modernity and the "modern" are descriptive of a historical period—the Modern Age, whose contents have determinate characteristics. In this spirit, Arendt writes:

Three great events stand at the threshold of the modern age and determine its character: the discovery of America and the ensuing exploration of the whole earth; the Reformation, which by

¹⁴ To put matters crudely: Lyotard theorizes modernity based on the recourse to metanarratives; Habermas, following Weber, theorizes modernity on the basis of the development of discrete spheres of rationality, each with their own logics.

expropriating ecclesiastical and monastic possessions started the two-fold process of individual expropriation and the accumulation of social wealth; the invention of the telescope and the development of a new science that considers the nature of the earth from the viewpoint of the nature of the universe. (HC, p.248)

In my view, an alternative account of modernity can be gleaned from The Human Condition. In my view, this account of modernity is central to Arendt's thought.

In it, Arendt gives a theory of modernity; she becomes, in effect, a theorist of modernity rather than a theorist of some of its contents. In this view, which Arendt never (to my knowledge) explicitly represents as a theory of modernity as such, the rise of the social, or the rise of society, is conceived as constitutive of modernity. That phenomenon, that event, which gives rise to modernity, that which distinguishes the modern from the pre-modern, is the emergence of a social sphere in the public realm.¹⁵

Having sought to portray Arendt as a theorist of modernity, I want to stress that the success of this argument is by no means crucial from the standpoint of my thesis. Whether or not Arendt's account of the rise of the social ought to be construed as her theory of modernity, as I think it ought to, there can be no doubt that Arendt considers the "rise of the social" to be a landmark event in modernity, with great implications for the political public sphere. The crucial point, for the purposes of the present discussion, is that Arendt represents the "rise of the social" as a changed state of affairs relative to the conditions obtaining in the

¹⁵ The view of Arendt as a theorist of modernity is implicit in much of the critical literature. Consider Seyla Benhabib's claim that Arendt's "...relentlessly negative account of the "rise of the social" and the decline of the public realm has been identified as the core of Arendt's political antimodernism." (Benhabib 1994, p.75) The view that Arendt comes out against modernity on the

ancient Greek *polis*. Under modern conditions, the social is “risen,” whereas in ancient Greece—where the field was limited to the household and political spheres—it was not. To put the matter crudely, the *polis* is a sort of “default setting,” against which the situation obtaining in (or constitutive of) modernity is measured.

In this chapter, I represent Arendt’s account of the “rise of the social,” which she also renders as the “rise of society.” Seyla Benhabib characterizes Arendt’s conception of the rise of the social in these terms:

By “the rise of the social” Arendt means the institutional differentiation of modern societies into the narrowly political realm on the one hand and the economic and the family on the other. As a result of these transformations, economic processes that had hitherto been confined to the “shadowy realm of the household” emancipate themselves and become public matters.” (Benhabib 1994, p.74)

My intention here is to give a basic account of Arendt’s conception of, and disposition towards, the social sphere. I want to show how the social sphere fits into the theoretical apparatus outlined in the *polis* discussion. In particular, I want to illustrate the close link between Arendt’s respective conception of the household sphere and the social sphere, and the theory of nature which undergirds them both. Of course, the main reference of this thesis is Arendt’s theory of the political public sphere: I will thus represent the implications of the “rise of the social” for the political public sphere. Specifically, I want to call attention to Arendt’s portrayal of the “rise of the social” as a threat to the political public

grounds of an objection to the rise of the social — this is not Benhabib’s claim — clearly implies

sphere. (At the end of this chapter, I include a diagram to illustrate the location of the social sphere relative to the theoretical apparatus introduced in the previous chapter.)

The Public and Private spheres

Prior to considering Arendt's treatment of the "rise of the social," it is necessary to introduce her conceptions of the public and private spheres, or realms. Arendt's theory of the "rise of the social" operates against the background of her conception of the public and private spheres.

In the context of Arendt's treatment of the *polis*, the public vs. private division is roughly equivalent to the political vs. household division. In the *polis* discussion, Arendt uses the terms "political realm" and "public realm" interchangeably. Similarly, the private sphere is roughly identical with the household sphere. The private sphere is primarily defined in negative terms, as that which "ought to remain hidden from public view." What is it that ought to remain hidden from public view? Arendt's answer to this question essentially consists in a restatement of her description of the household sphere: bodily functions, including reproduction, anything to do with individual or species survival on the level of the organism, any activity oriented towards coping with or overcoming nature—all of the constituent elements of the household sphere, in effect—ought to remain hidden from public view. Arendt's references to the "shadowy realm of the household" should not be mistaken for a call for light, for

that the "rise of the social" is at the heart of modernity.

a metaphorical throwing-open of the curtains, in the household sphere. Rather, the activities of the household are **appropriately** shadowy, ought to remain hidden from public view—they are **appropriately** private. With respect to the public vs. private question, it becomes impossible to distinguish Arendt's interpretation of ancient Greek thought from her own normative political-philosophical commitments. Arendt plainly feels that the public vs. private split was appropriately formulated by the Greeks; in modernity, this split is undermined, subverted, misconceived, with disastrous consequences. With the rise of modernity, the public sphere is invaded by elements which properly belong to the private sphere. This development is matched by the loss of the concepts of privacy and publicity in their original—and correct—meaning.¹⁶

In important respects, Arendt's account of the rise of the social is the story of the subversion of the public-private division. Of course, the public vs. private split is not just a conceptual split, for Arendt, but represents a “real” distinction. That is, when the public sphere is “invaded” by elements which properly belong in the private sphere, what is at issue is not merely a clouding of concepts, a lack of clarity on the level of ideas or an increased confusion with respect to important theoretical distinctions; rather, the invasion of the public realm described by the “rise of the social” represents a real event, a phenomenon to which Arendt's concepts refer and with which they correspond. Having made this point, I want to postpone a thorough analysis of Arendt's conception of the concept-phenomenon

¹⁶ It is important to note that the private sphere is by no means synonymous with the “intimate” sphere; the confusion of privacy and intimacy is one of the pathologies of modernity, for Arendt.

relationship until the fifth chapter of my thesis, in which I give explicit attention to Arendt's epistemological and methodological commitments.

The rise of the social

Arendt writes that:

... [T]he emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state. (Arendt, HC, p.29)

At the outset, I want to draw attention to Arendt's remark that "strictly speaking" the social realm is neither public nor private. What does it mean to "speak strictly" in this context? To deploy the concepts "public" and "private" strictly, as they ought properly to be used, is to use them as Arendt does in her analysis of the self-understanding of the ancient Greek *polis*. (Here again we return to the field of questions surrounding the relationship of the *polis* to the modern world on the level of concepts.) Strictly speaking, that which is private is that which is appropriately hidden from public view; that which is public is that which belongs in the full light of public view. Clearly, neither of these things can be said of the social. Consider Arendt's statement of the rise of the social:

The emergence of society—the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organizational devices—from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen. (HC, p.38)

The contents of the household sphere— of, of that which was the household sphere— are now released into the public realm. It is interesting to note the language and imagery Arendt uses to capture the phenomenon of the rise of the social. She writes that:

... with the rise of society, that is, the rise of the “household” (*oikia*) or of economic activities to the public realm, housekeeping and all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family have become a “collective” concern. **In the modern world, the two realms indeed flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life-process itself.** (HC, p.33) (bold mine)

Arendt’s reference to the “never-resting stream of the life-process” is particularly interesting. At play is Arendt’s conception of “nature,” which, as I tried to show in the previous chapter, underpins her conception of the household sphere.¹⁷ The household sphere contains those activities which operate on the level of, and are dedicated to coping with, nature. Under conditions of modernity, the type of activity formerly (i.e., in the *polis*) encompassed by the household now breaks into the public realm.¹⁸ When Arendt speaks of the two realms, household and public-political, flowing into each other like waves in the never-ending stream of the life process, the implication is clearly that the measure of the household

¹⁷ Arendt deepens her account of nature in her theory of world, which is the object of the next chapter of this thesis.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note the tremendous difficulty which some critics have in grasping Arendt’s conception of the “social.” Consider Wolin’s description: “The distinctive nature of the political or public realm was developed by the contrasts which Arendt drew between it and the concept of the “social.” The latter signified all of the activities and relationships which, by nature, were “private.” They included work and labor, love, sex, family, and household. These, she contended, were matters that could not withstand the glare of publicity that attends all political actions without being distorted and perverted. Private things, such as labor, “material concerns,” and “bodily functions,” should remain “hidden.” (Wolin, p.295) (bold mine) Wolin gets the concept mostly right, but goes off the rails at the crucial moment: the “social” designates those elements which, though they ought

sphere— nature— has also become the measure of the political- public sphere. (As I will show below, the subversion of the political-public sphere by the social is matched by the transformation of action into behaviour.) Arendt conceives of the social as belonging to, as emergent from, nature— but nature now released into, and colonizing, the public sphere.

Emphasizing the “natural” condition of the social, Arendt writes:

Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are allowed to appear in public. (HC, p.46)

The rise of the social, which might also be portrayed as the “rise of the natural,” clearly constitutes a threat to the political public sphere. The social realm does not merely enter into the public realm, thereby altering or modify it. Rather, the social enters into the public realm and corrupts it, subverts it. Or, as Arendt phrases the matter, the social realm “devours” the spheres with which it comes into contact:

Since the rise of society, since the admission of the household and housekeeping activities to the public realm, an irresistible tendency to grow, to devour the older realms of the political and private as well as the more recently established sphere of intimacy, has been one of the outstanding characteristics of the new realm. (HC, p.45)

It hardly needs to be said that Arendt’s account of the rise of the social does not just consist in a description of a new state of affairs on the level of history, sociology or philosophy; her account is normative through and through: the rise of

to remain in the private sphere, enter into the public realm. Wolin fails to differentiate between the

the social is a phenomenon which Arendt does not just describe, but emphatically deplores. Consider the following statement by Arendt:

The social realm, where the life process has established its own public domain, has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural; and it is against this growth, not merely against society but against a constantly growing social realm, that the private and intimate, on the one hand, and the political (in the narrower sense of the word), on the other, have proved incapable of defending themselves. (HC, p.47)

Arendt's reference to an "unnatural growth of the natural" clearly reflects her disapproval of the "natural's" entry into the public sphere. Arendt paints the picture of a "constantly-growing" social realm, cancer-like, consuming everything with which it comes into contact, everything that stands in its path.

In the first chapter, we saw that Arendt emphatically distinguishes action from behaviour. This distinction comes into clear focus in her treatment of the rise of the social. An examination of Arendt's claim that the rise of the social threatens the political public realm, when pursued on a level of greater detail, leads straight to the question of action. The pathology of "society," the peculiar threat to the political public sphere represented by the rise of the social, consists in the recession of the possibility of action. Arendt writes:

It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement. (HC, p.40)

As we saw in the previous chapter, actions plays a crucial role in the development of self-hood: action is both who-disclosive and who-constitutive. Thus, the recession of the possibility of action also entails the recession of the possibility of self-realization. The rise of the social has tragic consequences not only from the standpoint of *polis*-nostalgia, but also from the standpoint of the individual.¹⁹ The rise of the social is accompanied—indeed, characterized by—new constraints for the individual. On the level of the “spheres,” the social invades the political-public sphere, contaminating it, in a sense, with the “natural.” The expression of this contamination on the level of individuals and human activity is the transformation of action into behaviour.

In this brief chapter, I have tried to give a basic account of the rise of the social; to suggest its centrality with respect to Arendt’s conception of modernity; to locate the social sphere in relation to the framework introduced in the *polis* discussion, situating it in terms of Arendt’s public vs. private distinction and underlining its close link, via “nature,” to the household sphere; and to represent the social sphere in its dimension as a threat to the political-public sphere. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to what I consider to be the next crucial stage in Arendt’s treatment of the political sphere under conditions of modernity: her introduction, through the theory of “world,” of production and reification (and the corresponding philosophical-anthropological categories) as crucial for the

¹⁹ It is interesting to compare Arendt’s account of the reduction of action to behaviour in modernity with the accounts of sociologists Harold Garfinkel and Dennis Wrong. From different theoretical perspectives, Garfinkel and Wrong both object to the Talcott Parsons-dominated sociology of their day on the grounds that it misrepresents individuals as behaving according to pre-existing norms

generation and survival of the political sphere, and as sources of a new threat to the political-public sphere.

and rules, rather than as spontaneous actors. Their accounts operate in exactly the opposite direction of Arendt's.

Chapter Three

The political sphere and modernity (II): the theory of world

New and Old Categories

In this chapter, I explore Arendt's theory of "world" through the lens of its relation to the question of the political public sphere.²⁰ With the theory of "world," which I have represented as the second stage in the progressive formulation of the political public sphere under conditions of modernity, Arendt re-theorizes the public sphere through the (modern) categories of production and reification. This move is accompanied by a new statement of the threat to political-public space. Arendt writes:

Only the existence of a public realm and the world's subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence. If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only: it must transcend the life-span of mortal men. Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm is possible. (HC, p.55)

To action, which figures prominently both in the theory of the *polis* (as the fundamentally political activity) and in her account of the rise of the social (as that which is eclipsed by behaviour, the activity characteristic of society and the social, thereby threatening the political sphere, which is always dependent on action), Arendt now adds labor and work as crucial human activities.

In this chapter, I undertake an exposition of Arendt's theory of world—that is, to Arendt's account of how man's exercise of his capacities for labour, work and action, respectively, create and sustain the possibility of a common human world. I portray the theory of world as a deepening of the theory of the political public sphere under conditions of modernity. One of my objectives in this chapter is to show that even though Arendt formulates the theory of public space differently in her "world" discussion, on the basis of a theory of reification (and its corresponding philosophical-anthropological category, *homo faber*), the fundamental categories underlying the theory of world are the same categories which subtend her formulation and separation of the "natural" spheres, household and social, on the one hand, and the political sphere, the sphere of freedom, on the other. Following the exposition of Arendt's theory of world, I include a diagram to illustrate the way in which Arendt's theory of world operates on the basis of the same basic categories, and the same fundamental human ontology, as the separation of the spheres.

The theory of "world"

One of the central elements in an account of Arendt's theory of the world must be the elucidation of the relationship between worldliness— i.e., the human condition corresponding to man's inhabitation of the world—and Arendt's

²⁰ Arendt's theory of world operates against the background of her conception of the triumph of the Vita Activa over the Vita Contemplativa. I intend to bracket the Vita Activa - Vita Contemplativa question for the purposes of the present discussion.

account of work, one of the three fundamental human activities, along with labour and action, in Arendt's scheme. Arendt writes:

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not embedded in, and whose mortality is not encompassed by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness. (HC, p.7)

There is a sense in which the explanation of Arendt's theory of the world consists in the "unpacking" of the previous quotation, which represents Arendt's summary of her world-theory. Arendt makes it clear that the world is a "world of things," an "artificial world." That she includes the term "world" in her definition of the world is unfortunate; her meaning is straightforward, however. The world, as she understands it, is constructed, built. In negative terms, the world is not originally co-given with life²¹; rather, it is the product of man's exercise of a specific capacity—the capacity to work. Of course, this account of Arendt's conception of the world is provisional, and amounts to a report, rather than an explanation, of her theory. A proper account of the world, in Arendt's scheme, demands that we address two related issues: if the world is the result of man's capacity for work, it is important both to clarify the notion of work, and to probe the question of the world's constitution through the exercise of this capacity.

Fabrication is the central concept in work, and distinguishes it from labour, as well as all other human activities. The crucial feature in fabrication,

²¹ This conception is in sharp contrast to Arendt's theory of the world as it is formulated in The Life of the Mind.

and the distinguishing characteristic of man in the exercise of his capacity for work, is the generation of things, or thing-like entities²²: “[f]abrication, the work of *homo faber*, consists in reification.” (HC, p.139) Thus, the meaning of “work,” in Arendt’s conception, begins to take shape. Work is associated with fabrication, which involves reification. Arendt’s use of the word “reification” is uncharacteristically straightforward; she uses the term in its most basic sense (i.e., the transformation of an entity, material or conceptual, into a thing) without ascribing to it a peculiar technical function. In this respect, Arendt parts company with other thinkers, e.g. Marx (*Versachlichung, Verdinglichung*,) Lukács, the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer) et al., for whom the term “reification” has a tightly circumscribed technical meaning. At this juncture, the important point is that work names the fundamental human activity whereby things are made by man.

Arendt maintains that the distinctive feature of fabrication is that its end—namely, the produced thing— never comes as a surprise:

To have a definite beginning, and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication, which through this characteristic alone distinguishes itself from all other human activities. (HC pp. 143-44)

Though it may be difficult to accept Arendt’s claim that the **only** distinction between fabrication and “all other human activities” is the perfect correspondence between the intentions of the fabricator and the fabricated thing— especially in light of her detailed account of fabrication, such that it

²² The status of thing-like entities is clarified below.

seems to be distinct from other activities on several fronts— her insistence on the predictability of fabrication is a key Arendtian notion. It surfaces, notably, in her On Violence, where she contrasts the predictability of fabrication with the uncertain results of political action.²³ The basic point is that the fabrication of things provides a perfect match-up of means and ends, whereas other activities cannot claim such a link.

It should be clear that the meaning of “work” in common usage does not correspond to the sense with which Arendt wishes to invest the term in The Human Condition. For example, we are inclined to think of work as synonymous with “remunerated toil” or “labour”; this tendency is reflected in our language, where the term “workers” broadly signifies anyone benefiting from employment. With Arendt’s association of work with fabrication, and, in turn, with reification, we have a positive criterion for determining whether an activity qualifies as “work:” is the terminus of the activity the creation of a thing, where previously there was none? If the answer to this question is yes, then and only then can we speak of work. We must, however, be careful to qualify this requirement, in two respects. First, the things produced through work must endure; Arendt writes

In the process of making... the end is beyond doubt: it has come when an entirely new thing with enough durability to remain in the world as an independent entity has been added to the human artifice. (HC, p.143)

²³ Hannah Arendt, On Violence (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970) “...the end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted...” (OV, p.4)

The importance of this essential quality of fabrication—that the things which result from it must be lasting—will emerge in our treatment of Arendt’s contrast between work and labour. Second, Arendt’s understanding of fabrication is such that not only things in the material sense, but also thing-like entities count towards the identification of work. This is, of course, the usual sense of reification; the concept does not require an elaborate explanation. Arendt speaks of the “things of thought” as an instance of what I have called thing-like entities. She writes:

The reification which occurs in writing something down, painting an image, modeling a figure, or composing a melody is of course related to the thought that preceded it, but what actually makes the thought a reality and fabricates things of thought is the same workmanship which, through the primordial instrument of human hands, builds the other things of the human artifice. (HC, p.169)

The question remains: how is it that the things created by man are constitutive of, or contribute to, a world, or worldliness? The answer to this question brings to the surface the relationship between the world and the human artifice, and their opposition to nature. Arendt writes:

The reality and reliability of the human world rests primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced... Human life, insofar as it is world-building, is engaged in a constant process of reification, and the degree of worldliness of produced things, which all together form the human artifice, depends on their greater or lesser permanence in the world itself. (HC, p.96)

Worldliness—that the fact that there is a world, and that our inhabitation of it is part of the human condition—depends on the endurance of the human artifice, which

is built on and serves to transcend the flux and impermanence characteristic of nature. Arendt writes, “[w]ithout a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement, but no objectivity.” (HC, p.137) This point is crucial to Arendt’s world-theory.

The world, made by man, is the result of man’s imposition of his own ends, his own purposes, into the realm of nature. In metaphorical terms, the human artifice, brought into being by man, forms an island of sorts on the undifferentiated sea of life that is nature. Prior to the erection of the human artifice, there is no world, but only the cycle of nature. Until man places a world of things between himself and nature, there can be no objectivity; that is to say, the possibility of man’s introduction of his own ends, the imposition of his own instrumentality, depends on the transcendence of nature and its imperatives, for which the world is required.

The opposition between the world, which is founded on the endurance of the human artifice, and nature, which is characterized by flux, transience and the impermanence of the life-cycle, is reflected in the distinction between work and labour. In Arendt’s philosophico-anthropological language, the work-labour distinction is expressed as the difference between *homo faber* and the *animal laborans*. While the result of man’s work— his activity qua *homo faber*—is a thing, which contributes to the human artifice, man’s labour, his activity qua *animal laborans*— is undifferentiated from the biological cycle of life. Arendt explicitly establishes the work-labour distinction, and the world-nature distinction which it reflects; she writes:

... unlike working, whose end has come when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things, laboring always moves in the same circle, which is prescribed by the biological process of the living organism and the end of its 'toil and trouble' comes only with the death of this organism. (HC, p.98)

Arendt's differentiation of labour and work on the grounds of the world-nature distinction is evidenced in her association of labour and worldlessness. Having argued that pain, which can never be articulated or reified, is the paradigm example of a worldless phenomenon, Arendt makes the connection between pain—and its attendant worldlessness—and labour. She writes:

The only activity which corresponds strictly to this process of worldlessness, or rather to the loss of world that occurs in pain, is laboring, where the human body, its activity notwithstanding, is also thrown back upon itself, concentrates upon nothing but its own being alive, and remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning. (HC, p.115)

Again the identification of labour with nature, which is also expressed as imprisonment in the life-cycle, is manifest. Work names that activity by which the possibility of transcending nature comes into being; this transcendence is actualized in worldliness, which is achieved by the erection of a world which stands outside of the life-cycle, whose endurance is in contrast to the impermanence of nature.

At this stage, our account of Arendt's conception of the world is almost complete. What remains to be explained is the role of action²⁴ in Arendt's world-

²⁴ "Action" should be read to encompass speech and thought as well.

theory. While action is not, strictly speaking, constitutive of worldliness, the world is conditioned by action, such that the possibility of **meaning** arises. Arendt writes:

The redemption of life, which is sustained by labour, is worldliness, which is sustained by fabrication. [*H*]omo faber [can be] redeemed from his predicament of meaninglessness... only through the related categories of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories as naturally as fabrication produces use objects. ... From the viewpoint of the *animal laborans*, it is like a miracle that it is also a being which knows of and inhabits a world; from the viewpoint of *homo faber*, it is like the revelation of divinity, that meaning should have a place in this world. (HC, p.9)

In Arendt's view, man qua *animal laborans*, i.e., in the exercise of his capacity for labour, is "locked into" the life-cycle of nature, the cycle governing his own body; man qua *homo faber*, i.e., in the exercise of his capacity for fabrication, constitutes, contributes to, and maintains the world, thereby transcending the natural order to which he would otherwise be condemned. The accomplishment of man insofar as he realizes his ability to **act** is the generation of meaning in the world. Indeed, Arendt's use of religious language (e.g., "salvation," "redemption," "miracle"...) to explicate the significance of action is worthy of note.

The distinction between work and action, according to Arendt, consists in the fact that "[f]abrication is surrounded by and in constant contact with the world: action and speech are in constant contact with the web of the acts and words of other men." (HC, p.188) In turn, this "web of... acts and words" constitutes what Arendt calls the "world of human affairs,"(p.95) whose

introduction represents one of the most difficult aspects of Arendt's world-theory. Crucial to Arendt's conception of the "world of human affairs" is her stipulation that action itself is unmediated by things— i.e., the products of fabrication: action, she writes, is "the only activity which goes on between men without the intermediary of things or matter..." (HC, p.97) Another way of saying this is that action is originally a worldless phenomenon. If action, which is essentially worldless, is to "join the world," it must undergo a process of transformation.

Arendt writes:

Viewed in their worldliness, action, speech and thought have much more in common than any of them has with work of labour. They themselves do not "produce," bring forth anything, they are as futile as life itself. In order to become worldly things... they must first be seen, heard and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were... The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things. (HC, p.10)

The transformation of discrete acts into the "web" of acts constitutive of the world of human affairs thus depends on plurality— the human condition corresponding to action (HC, p.7)— and to reification, the trademark of *homo faber*. It is interesting to note that here, action has priority over work. Clearly, Arendt means to distinguish between the world and worldliness, on the one hand, and the "world of human affairs," which is founded on action, on the other. As I have already suggested, Arendt specifies that worldliness itself does not, strictly speaking, require plurality. She makes this point explicitly when she writes:

In his isolation, not only undisturbed by others, but also not seen and heard and confirmed by them, *homo faber* is together not only with the product he makes, but also with the world of things to which he will add his own products; in this, albeit indirect, way, he is still together with others who made the world and who also are fabricators of things. (HC, p.209)

Though the world of human affairs depends indirectly on the fact of worldliness— that is, on the activity of *homo faber* and the human capacity for work, for the fabrication of things and of “thing-like” entities— what is immediately presupposed is a plurality of human beings. In other words, the world of human affairs requires that there be a world in the first place; but what is specifically at issue in the world of human affairs is the presence and interaction of other human agents— and the activity which corresponds to this condition of plurality, namely action.²⁵

Whereas action names an activity, the world of human affairs, as Arendt conceives it, is worldliness conditioned by man’s capacity for action. Another way of saying this is that Arendt’s conceptual formulation of action isolates it from things, and from the world; by strict definition, action is worldless (or, as she puts it in this context, “futile.”) In concrete terms, however, action is situated in the world, where it is made tangible, i.e., subject to reification, and conditions the experience of worldliness. The world, conditioned by action, takes on meaning and becomes a “home for mortal men.” The intelligibility of action’s role in bringing meaning into the world depends on the understanding of action as a narrative faculty. Arendt makes this point when she writes that:

... acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. (HC, p.174)

My final point seems obvious: what Arendt renders in this discussion as the “world,” or the “world of human affairs,” is identical with what she calls the “realm of freedom,” the “way of life founded on speech and action,” in different contexts. That is, Arendt’s theory of “world” is a theory of the political public sphere under conditions of modernity.

I indicated above that Arendt’s decision to re-theorize the political-public sphere as a “world of human affairs” resting on a thing-world is accompanied by a re-statement of the threat to the political sphere. The threat to public space in Arendt’s theory of world issues from the possibility that the logic of production and reification—which are necessary from the standpoint of the generation and maintenance of the public sphere—will become its end and sole measure, effectively achieving dominance over it. This represents a change, at least in emphasis, from the account of the threat to the political sphere offered in the rise of the social discussion. As I tried to show in the previous chapter, the threat to the political sphere described in the rise of the social discussion consists in the encroachment of an ever-expanding, all-consuming social sphere; Arendt rendered this threat as an “unnatural growth of the natural.” The threat originated in the realm of nature, and consisted in the intrusion of the “natural sphere” into

²⁵ It may be that the requirement that human affairs involve many humans follows from a definition of “human affairs”; but Arendt is not trying to make the point by definition.

the human-political sphere. In the theory of world discussion, by contrast, the threat to the social does not originate in the realm of nature, but in man's capacity to **counter** nature, to separate himself from nature. Of course, in order to demonstrate this point, I need first to locate the elements of the theory of world—man in his capacities for labour, work and action, respectively—to the framework introduced in Arendt's treatment of the *polis*.

The first category introduced in the "world" discussion is easy to place in relation to the *polis* framework: as Arendt repeatedly insists, man's capacity for labour corresponds to his situation as a being operating on the level of nature. Labour belongs to the category of nature, and is associated with necessity, with the flux and impermanence of the life-cycle. The third term in the world discussion—namely, action—is, of course, explicitly present in Arendt's discussion of the *polis*; indeed, action is at the very heart of the *polis* discussion, and of the *polis* itself. The truly original term in Arendt's theory of world is **work**. The introduction of work, and of man in his capacity for work—as *homo faber*—inserts a new degree of complexity into the nature/necessity vs. politics/action/freedom opposition which remains at the heart of her theory of the political sphere.

In her initial formulation, Arendt opposes the realm of necessity, the household sphere, to the realm of freedom, the political sphere. In the second stage of her treatment of the political sphere under conditions of modernity, Arendt adds an account of the **passage** from nature/necessity to politics/action/freedom: for the first time, Arendt theorizes the transition itself.

The crucial new term in this step is work, man's capacity for reification, which makes it possible to erect the permanent framework for action. More precisely, the new step consists in the introduction of the labour vs. work distinction, which makes it possible for Arendt to theorize the difference between "pre-action" activity which is oriented towards coping with nature, and which operates on the level of nature, according to the "rules of nature," on the one hand (labour,) and "pre-action" activity which is oriented towards opposing nature, on the other hand (work.) In my view, the absence of this differentiation in Arendt's *polis* discussion accounts for the ambiguity surrounding her treatment of the household sphere under the conditions of ancient Greece. As I tried to show in the first chapter of my thesis, Arendt's account of the household sphere in ancient Greece reflects two separate commitments with respect to its "*telos*": in its etiological moment, the account of the household sphere is such that it is oriented towards coping with nature and necessity; in its second, dominant, moment, the account is such that the household sphere is oriented towards the achievement by some men (the citizens) of the emancipation from nature required to make possible their accession into the political sphere.

With these considerations in view, the new account of the threat to the political sphere under conditions of modernity comes into focus. Rather than a simple encroachment of nature into the realm of freedom, the new threat is represented by a generalization of the very mode of activity upon which the political realm depends. The human capacity for work, which is, in essence, a capacity for reification, as soon it becomes a general principle of all human

activity, threatens the possibility of action. The reduction of all modes of human activity to instrumental activity—to activity modeled on the creation of things, on the imposition of pre-determined ends—imperils the human world. (In this stage of her treatment of the political sphere under conditions of modernity, Arendt’s account of the threat to the political sphere echoes the reification-based accounts of the Frankfurt school, which portray Enlightenment as a self-destructive principle.)²⁶

In the next chapter, I consider the final stage in Arendt’s treatment of the political sphere under conditions of modernity: her reformulation of the theory of the political sphere through the theory of power in her books On Revolution and On Violence. Whereas in the theory of “world” Arendt theorizes the political sphere—that permanent structure which “houses” the way of life based on speech and action—on the basis of a theory of reification, Arendt now turns to the theory of power for an explanation of that which enables, but also transcends and survives, the moment of action.

²⁶ Cf. e.g., Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, John Cumming, trans. New York: Continuum Press, 1996.

Chapter Four

The political sphere and modernity (III): the theory of power

Arendt's theory of power represents a third stage in her account of the political public sphere under conditions of modernity. Though this development is suggested in The Human Condition, it is theorized explicitly in On Revolution through Arendt's contrast between the French and American Revolutions, and in On Violence, the companion volume to On Revolution.

In what follows, I propose to represent the beginnings of the theory of power in The Human Condition (I); to trace Arendt's treatment of "power" in On Violence (II); to trace Arendt's deployment of the theory of power as the basis for differentiating the French and American Revolutions in On Revolution (III); and to consider some implications of the theory of power for the interpretation of Arendt's theory of politics and the political sphere via an examination of its reception by Habermas (IV).

The theory of power in The Human Condition (I)

Seyla Benhabib distinguishes between Arendt's conceptions of the public-political space of the ancients, on the one hand, which she (Benhabib) terms "agonistic," and public-political space under conditions of modernity, which she terms "associational." In my view, Benhabib's distinction is plausible only to the extent that it bears on a shift in **emphasis** in Arendt's account. Arendt's treatment of the public-political space of the ancients has an associational dimension,

which is neither in conflict with, nor in opposition to, its agonistic dimension, but is rather **explicitly theorized as necessary in relation to it**. That is, Arendt's conception of the *polis* is such that its characteristic *agon* can exist only in the context of a "human web" in which the *agon* can be received, transformed into speech and memory, and thus made immortal. In The Human Condition, what I have called a "human web," and what Arendt calls a "web of act and speech," is associated with, though not yet explicitly theorized on the basis of, **power**. It is misleading to speak of Arendt's "conceptions" of the political space of the ancients, on the one hand, and of the moderns, on the other, as if Arendt had two discrete conceptions; indeed, one of the main points I want to establish in this thesis is that Arendt develops a single conception of political-public space in the course of successive reflections on distinct historical objects. Put differently: Arendt's conception of political-public space under conditions of modernity is consistent— or, more accurately, **continuous**, with her treatment of political-public space of the ancients.

In The Human Condition, Arendt writes that "[p]ower is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence." (HC, p.200) While this assertion does not amount to a definition of power— or, indeed, to an explanation of it— it certainly does indicate that power plays a central role in Arendt's theory of political space. In effect, Arendt portrays power as the glue binding people together in a political sphere. Arendt also gives a statement of the condition for the generation of power: "... power springs up

between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”

(HC, p.200) She elaborates on this claim when she writes that:

The only indispensable material in the generation of power is the living together of people. Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them, and the foundation of cities, which as city-states have remained paradigmatic for all Western political organization, is therefore indeed the most important material prerequisite for power. **What keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed (what we today call “organization”) and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power.** (HC, p.201) (bold mine)

Still, we are left to ask, What, precisely, is power, for Arendt? Arendt never gives a precise answer to this question; certainly, she never pursues the question of the “ontological status” of power (or of “organization”), nor does she attempt a social-scientific specification of it. Indeed, Arendt does not attempt an account of power on the level of an investigation into its causes; rather, she tells us that power is both the condition of people living together in a political community, in a community founded on a way of life centred on speech and action, and the product of the way of life characterized by speech and action. My suggestion is that, for all intents and purposes, Arendt’s account of power, which always remains quite intuitive in The Human Condition, is essentially a redescription of her theory of the political sphere and the grounds for its constitution. Consider Arendt’s claim that:

Power preserves the public realm and the space of appearance, and as such it is also the lifeblood of the human artifice, which, unless it is the scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories engendered by them, lacks its ultimate *raison d’être*. Without being talked about by men and

without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object; without the human artifice to house them, human affairs would be as floating, as futile and vain, as the wanderings of the nomad tribes. (HC, p.204) (bold mine)

I want to show that the identity between the theory of the political sphere, on the one hand, and the theory of power, on the other, comes clearly into focus in On Revolution. Having said this, I want to make the additional claim that a change does take place in the transition from The Human Condition to On Revolution. In the former book, the theory of power emerges, as I have said, as a redescription of the theory of the political public sphere. In On Revolution (and in On Violence), the political public sphere is theorized through the theory of power. Thus, we see a repetition of what by now is a familiar theme: the theory of the political public sphere is deepened through a conceptual innovation, even though it still operates on the basis of, depends on, the basic categories and fundamental human ontology introduced in Arendt's treatment of the *polis*.

The theory of power in On Violence (II)

Since On Revolution chronologically precedes On Violence, my decision to deal with the latter book first merits an explanation. Arendt wrote On Violence as the companion volume to On Revolution. In On Violence, Arendt undertakes clearly to formulate the concepts at play in her prior work, rigorously to distinguish them, and to give some statement of their epistemological and methodological status. I want to proceed by first examining the key concepts in

Arendt's theory of power, and will then examine Arendt's deployment of them in the interpretation and evaluation of a concrete historical situation— i.e., the respective cases of the French and American Revolutions.

In On Violence, Arendt defines power as "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert." She writes that "[p]ower is never the property of the individual: it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together." (OV, p.44) Power issues from the participation of men in collaborative action. When men come together act together collectively, power "springs up." It is important to note that when Arendt claims that power arises from the collective action of a group, her interest is not, in the first instance at least, in making claims about the "ontological status" of the group. Thus, it would be misleading to assert that for Arendt, power arises when people come together and constitute themselves as a political subject, as a collective or supra-personal agent or subject. On the question of the ontological status of the group which, through collective action, generates power, Arendt is generally silent, so far as I can determine. Indeed, it is probably more appropriate to speak of "communal action" than of "collective action." It is also worth noting both that the content of communal action—the particular aims toward which a plurality orients itself— appears to be irrelevant from the standpoint of the generation of power (what matters is that people are acting together), and that Arendt does not theorize rules or norms governing the selection or determination of particular aims. The most that can be said about the generation of the particular collective goals is that this process is a function of speech and action. When I turn to Arendt's reception by

Habermas (in section IV of this chapter,) I will indicate the way in which a lack of clarity on these points can distort Arendt's theory of the political public sphere.

Power and action

The theory of power, articulated in On Violence, is closely related to the category of action, outlined in The Human Condition. Arendt draws attention to this when she writes that:

What makes man a political being is his faculty of action; it enables him to get together with his peers, to act in concert, and to reach out for goals and enterprises which would never enter his mind, let alone the desires of his heart, had he not been given this gift... (OV, p.82)

Of course, that which "makes man a political being" is identical to that which is generative of power, namely getting together with his peers, acting in concert.

Since power depends on the capacity of man to "get together with his peers, to act in concert," and since this capacity depends of the "faculty of action," power too depends on action. Just as action and power are closely linked, so too are power and politics. Indeed, in On Violence and On Revolution, the theories of power and of the political sphere converge to the point of virtual identity.

Power vs. violence

To a large extent, Arendt formulates the theory of power through an exercise in conceptual separation:²⁷ many of her claims about power arise in

²⁷ Indeed, many critics cite Arendt's proficiency at the "art of making distinctions" (to use Seyla Benhabib's expression) as the grounds for her excellence. Cf. Benhabib, Ricoeur, et al.

connection with her attempt to establish the distinction between power and violence. (Indeed, separating conceptually power and violence is at the heart of Arendt's project in On Violence. Of course, my primary objective is not to come to an understanding of On Violence on its own terms, as it were, but to engage it to the extent that this engagement furthers the present discussion, which is oriented towards the analysis and critique of Arendt's theory of the political public sphere.) Of violence, Arendt writes that it

...is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it. (OV, p.46)

Violence, distinguished by its instrumental character, is more closely associated with work than with action, though, unlike work, its end is not predictable; as we saw in the previous chapter, the predictability of work's end is the hallmark of fabrication. Power, in contrast with violence, cannot be resolved into a command-obedience, or means-end relation. Power is nevertheless the **condition** for instrumental, means-end action by a group: Arendt writes that "the power structure itself precedes and outlasts all aims, so that power, far from being a means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to act in terms of the means-end category." (OV, p.51) Here, we see how Arendt's theory of power builds on the categories introduced in her theory of world: violence, associated with work and instrumentality, is opposed to power, which belongs to the same category as action.

It is interesting to note that Arendt's treatment of the power- violence distinction works in a different direction than her account, in the theory of world discussion, of the threat to political-public space represented by the universalization of reification into a general principle of human activity as such. In the "world" discussion, Arendt portrayed the generalization of instrumental activity as a threat to the political sphere; in the "power" discussion, by contrast, Arendt consistently emphasizes the **limits** of violence, an instrumental mode of activity, in comparison with power, which is affiliated to action. Arendt's position is such that power—and thus, action—is always, necessarily, at the heart of any political formation. On the level of its thematic content, Arendt's discussion of the power-violence distinction reads like a reminder that violence can only go so far, and is always of secondary importance in relation to power. Violence can destroy a particular political configuration (i.e., a particular configuration of power), but can never constitute one.²⁸

Power, justification and legitimacy

Arendt's treatment of the theory of the political sphere through the theory of power takes her account into the sphere of the theory of government; for the first time, she refers to the relation of the political sphere to **government**²⁹: she

²⁸ The relevance of this question comes into focus in connection with Habermas's interpretation of Arendt's theory of power.

²⁹ "For the first time" in the course of her treatment of the theory of the political sphere as it is rooted in her treatment of the Greek *polis* in The Human Condition, that is. In her earlier The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt gives detailed attention to particular modern forms of government—totalitarianism among them.

claims that "government is essentially organized and institutionalized power," that power is the "essence of government." For this reason, she argues, it is absurd to seek to justify power as such: any political community, any form of government, is by its an expression, an emanation, a form of power. Thus, Arendt writes that "[p]ower needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities..." (OV, p.52) Using the language of "essences," she writes that:

Power is indeed of the essence of all government, but violence is not. ...And what needs justification by something else is never the essence of anything. ... Power is [an absolute]; it is, as they say, "an end in itself." (OV, p.51)

Arendt's position is emphatically not that any form of government is acceptable simply by virtue of its existence, however: she distinguishes between justification and legitimacy. She writes that what power

... does need is legitimacy. ...Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow. Legitimacy, when challenged, bases itself on an appeal to the past, while justification relates to an end which is in the future. (OV, p.52)

The initial thrust of Arendt's justification-legitimacy distinction is straightforward enough: to ask for a justification of power is to call into the question the very fact of power, which is absurd; one might as well demand a justification of the lymphatic system. The reasonable question bears on the legitimacy of power, which calls into question a particular form, or configuration, of power. However, Arendt's subsequent assertion that the question of the legitimacy of power is limited in scope to an examination of the "original getting together" at the source of a particular form of government is puzzling. To cite the "original getting

together" as the one and only source of a government's legitimacy seems entirely arbitrary. Since this issue is peripheral from the standpoint of the present examination of the theory of the political public sphere, I will not give it detailed attention. It is worth noting, however, that Arendt does not distinguish between an "original getting together" as a matter of fact (or, perhaps less restrictively, as a historical event,) on the one hand, and as a sort of mythical referent, constantly reinterpreted and reformulated in and through the discourse of legitimacy. Arendt's position appears to be that legitimacy is **derived** from an "original getting together," rather than in an immanent reinterpretation of it. In my view, Arendt does not supply the material for a plausible theory of legitimacy in On Violence.³⁰

The theory of power as the basis for differentiating the French and American Revolutions: On Revolution (III)

At this juncture, I propose to turn from a discussion of Arendt's theory of power in the abstract, as it is undertaken in On Violence, in favor of an examination of Arendt's **deployment** of the theory of power in On Revolution. At the centre of On Revolution is Arendt's contrast between the French and American Revolutions, established on the basis of the theory of power.

Revolutionary self-understandings: the constitutional texts

³⁰ The key point in connection with the "Habermas controversy" is that Habermas confuses power as such with a legitimate configuration of power.

Arendt writes that "under modern conditions, the act of foundation is identical with the framing of a constitution." (OR, p. 125) Thus, Arendt's analysis of the French and American Revolutions relies heavily (though by no means exclusively) on her analysis of their respective foundational texts. In this first part of my examination of On Revolution, I will focus on Arendt's treatment of the respective self-understandings of the French and American revolutions, as these are expressed in their constitutional texts. Afterwards, I will move to consider Arendt's "direct" comparison of the French and American revolutions, an analysis which assumes an "external perspective" with respect to Revolutionary ideology.

Arendt's analysis proceeds by showing that the French revolutionary texts reflect a profound misunderstanding with respect to the question of power and the political sphere, while the American revolutionary texts, by contrast, reflect a remarkable clarity on the issue. Reproducing the dynamic of the *polis* discussion, Arendt's account of the self-understanding of the American Revolution is virtually indistinguishable from her own position. She writes:

[The Rights of Man,] ... [i]n distinction from the American Bill of Rights, upon which the Declaration of the Rights of Man was modeled... were meant to spell out primary positive rights, inherent in man's nature, as distinguished from his political status, and as such they tried to reduce politics to nature. **The Bills of Rights, on the contrary, were meant to institute permanent restraining controls on all political power, and hence presupposed the existence of a body politic and the functioning of political power.** (OR, p. 109) (bold mine)

In France, the Rights of Man were theorized in abstraction from a political community in which they could be given brought into being and sustained.

Arendt even charges the French revolutionaries with the closest thing to heresy in her framework: they attempt to “reduce politics to nature.” As I have tried to show in previous chapters, Arendt renders the relationship between politics and nature as one of irreducible opposition. To derive rights from nature³¹ is absurd, for Arendt. The French proceed as if rights could be conjured up somehow, could be brought into being, on the basis of a constitution.

Whereas the French revolutionary texts reflect a tragic naiveté with respect to the relation of rights to politics and power, the American revolutionary texts reflect a clear understanding of it. On Arendt’s account, the American texts never theorize rights as somehow independent from politics and power; rather, the fact of political power and a healthy political sphere are presupposed as conditions for rights. In effect—there are no non-political rights: all rights are political rights. The American Constitution was intended to regulate, but not to generate or constitute, political power. (Indeed, the distinction between the French and American Revolutionary self-understandings operates on a close parallel to the distinction between the legitimacy and the justification of power.)

The American colonists understood that “royal and company charters confirmed and legalized rather than established and founded their “commonwealth.”” (OR, p.177) The case of the French Revolutionaries is quite different; summarizing their political-philosophical confusion, Arendt writes that:

³¹ Interestingly, Arendt does not speak to the question of whether rights can be derived from reason. In the cycle of books originating in The Human Condition, Arendt appears to overlook Kant, and the relation of judgment to political action, entirely. Of course, these questions are at the centre of her later The Life of the Mind, which is beyond the scope of the present analysis, and of this thesis.

The French Declaration of the Rights of Man, as the Revolution came to understand it, was meant to constitute the source of all political power, to establish not the control but the foundation-stone of the body politic. The new body politic was supposed to rest upon man's natural rights, upon his rights in so far as he is nothing but a natural being... that is, upon his right to the necessities of life. And these rights were not understood as prepolitical rights that no government and no political power has the right to touch, but as the very content as well as the ultimate end of government and power. (OR, p.109)

Of course, when Arendt accuses the theorists of the French Revolution of equating “man’s natural rights” with “[man’s] rights to the necessities of life,” she has them operating within the framework introduced in The Human Condition. Arendt might well have said, without an appreciable change in meaning, that French revolutionary ideology mistook the concerns of the household sphere for those of the political sphere; they imported a concern with coping with nature, with the biological requirements of the organism, into the political public realm.

Arendt’s view, clearly expressed in On Revolution and consistent with The Human Condition, is that the question of “overcoming nature,” while relevant from the standpoint of politics, since emancipation from nature and necessity is a precondition for the accession into the political sphere, is nevertheless categorically separate from it. The “question of necessity” is relevant to the political sphere, but can never figure as its content. The implication of this view, to which I will devote detailed attention in the following chapter, is that the question of who gets to overcome nature, of whose “necessities of life” are to be provided, is strictly separate from the question of

which regulative principles ought to be adopted with respect to the exercise of political power.

Analysis from an “external” perspective

As I stated above, Arendt does not limit her analysis of the French and American Revolutions to an examination of their respective texts, much less does she claim that the contrast between the Revolutions is a function of textual differences. Beyond the differences in the constitutional texts, the material conditions obtaining in Europe and America were significantly different, as was the scope of their respective revolutions. Consider Arendt’s claim that:

Nothing could be less fair than to take the success of the American Revolution for granted and to sit in judgment of the failure of the men of the French Revolution. ... The reason for success and failure (sic) was that the predicament of poverty was absent from the American scene but present everywhere else in the world. ... [S]ince the laborious in America were poor but not miserable... they were not driven by want, and the revolution was not overwhelmed by them. **The problem they posed was not social but political, it concerned not the order of society but the form of government.** (OR, p.68) (bold mine)

It is important to be clear about Arendt’s claim above. She is not claiming, at least in the first instance, that the Americans pulled off their revolution because of the strong social base underlying their body politic. Rather, she is drawing attention to the situation in France, where the misery of the “laborious” motivated them to rush into the political sphere in search of a solution to their problems. Arendt’s point is that the solution to the problems of “want” and “misery” are not

to be found in the political sphere, that these problems are simply not political in nature. To the extent that the problem of misery—a social problem, properly understood—finds its way into the political sphere, the political sphere is weakened. A revolution—a political undertaking, strictly speaking—is compromised to the extent that it is charged with burdens which are clearly—and, for Arendt, categorically—beyond its ken. Arendt does not directly cite the relative prosperity of the “laborious” in America as a cause of the American revolution’s success; rather, she cites the absence of misery in America, which has the effect of keeping the laborious (qua laborious) from entering the political sphere.

Arendt's claim that the presence of misery, of the "want" of the "laborious," in the French case doomed the Revolution brings us back to her categorical separation of the "political" and the "social," and thus to The Human Condition. Arendt's diagnosis of the French Revolution's failure in On Revolution essentially consists in a version of the “rise of the social” story, albeit with the special circumstance of misery urging the intrusion into the political public sphere of concerns which properly belong in the “shadowy realm of the household.” In the “original” account, given in The Human Condition, the “rise of the social” is roughly equivalent to the “rise of society.” The phenomenon of society’s emergence results in the colonization of the political public sphere by the social.

In On Revolution, Arendt adds a new dimension to this account: the invasion of the political sphere by the social sphere is accelerated by the

dysfunctionality of the latter. The phenomenon of misery, which is a social problem, a problem arising in the social sphere, causes a stampede of the laborious into the political sphere. Of course, the problem of misery, along other social problems, cannot be solved within the political sphere.

Having diagnosed the failure of the French revolution as the result of its “infection” by social concerns, Arendt introduces a new claim. She now explicitly theorizes the concerns of the social— which she already allows are relevant from the standpoint of the political, though they are never properly contained within it— as problems to be resolved through technological-instrumental administration. Arendt writes:

Since the [French] revolution had opened the gates of the political realm to the poor, this realm had indeed become "social". It was overwhelmed by **cares and worries which actually belonged in the sphere of the household and which, even if they were permitted to enter the public realm, could not be solved by political means, since they were matters of administration, to be put into the hands of experts**, rather than issues which could be settled by the two-fold process of decision and persuasion. (OR, p.91) (bold mine)

Arendt's insistence that "social questions"— including, most prominently, the satisfaction of the requirements of food and shelter— ought to be resolved in the "sphere of the household" is not new. What is new, however, is Arendt's claim that the solution to social questions is to be determined and administered by experts. Indeed, this claim constitutes one of the most perplexing elements in Arendt's political thought. It is important to be clear on the scope of Arendt's claim here, which she reiterates at numerous junctures in On Revolution: she does

not claim merely that social questions involve a non-political element, or that they necessarily involve a technological-instrumental-administrative component; rather, her claim is that social questions are totally, categorically non-political, and that they are totally, categorically technological-instrumental-administrative.

Arendt's claim is bound to strike most contemporary readers of her work as counter-intuitive (to put the matter mildly.) Her position is hardly surprising, however, when seen in the context of her development of the theory of the political sphere under conditions of modernity in three successive stages. In each of the stages I represented, Arendt reformulates the basic opposition at the centre of her social and political thought, namely, the opposition between the political sphere (the realm of freedom, associated with action) on one hand, and the realm of nature on the other hand (associated with nature, necessity, and the life-cycle) on the other. The key point is that Arendt always retains and carries forward the theoretical innovations which attend her re-formulations of the freedom-political vs. nature-necessity opposition. In the first stage, Arendt introduces the "social," whose contents have escaped into the public realm. In the second stage, Arendt theorizes the opposition to nature on the basis of a theory of reification: through the exercise of his capacity for work, man builds a world of things which stands apart from nature, which is specifically non-natural. When, in the third stage of her account of the political sphere under conditions of modernity, Arendt returns to the familiar question of how man is to solve the problem of nature, of necessity— which solution must be achieved as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the constitution of, and entry into, the political sphere— she retains

the innovation introduced in the theory of “world”: nature is overcome by instrumental, means-end, activity, which is itself non-political.

The social: pre-political vs. non-political

At this juncture, I want to introduce a distinction which Arendt does not make. This is the distinction between the social as *pre-political*, and as *non-political*. In the next chapter, I will argue that this distinction reflects an unacknowledged, unresolved tension in Arendt’s work, and that it has unfortunate consequences for Arendt’s theory of the political public sphere. For the time being, however, my aim will be limited to the demonstration that Arendt makes two distinct claims—that the social is pre-political, on the one hand, and that it is non-political, on the other.

Arendt clearly endorses the view that the social is pre-political, as I define the expression. The claim that the social is pre-political implies that the resolution of social problems—namely, those problems which centre on coping with necessity, with satisfying the requirements of nature, e.g., securing food and shelter—must be achieved, at least for some people, if a political sphere is to be sustained. At minimum, those people who enter into, or remain within, the political sphere must leave necessity behind, somehow. The claim that the social is pre-political can be stated differently, of course: an equivalent assertion is that the political sphere has a social substructure. In any case, this claim exactly mirrors Arendt’s account of the household-*polis* relation, which I presented in the

first chapter of this thesis: the possibility of accession into the *polis* depends on success on the level of the household.³²

Under conditions of modernity, those concerns which were formerly contained in the household sphere have been released— or, perhaps more appropriately, have escaped— into the public sphere, so that the overcoming of necessity is now the province of the social realm. Here, we are faced with a problem of interpretation. Arendt objects to the social realm as such: she regrets that “natural” concerns have escaped into the public realm; her position is that these concerns belong in the household sphere. And yet, Arendt appears to accept that there is no way to put the genie back in the bottle, as it were; she appears to accept that the social realm is here to stay. To accept as a starting point the fact of a non-private “natural realm,” of a social realm in the public sphere, is also to accept, implicitly, that the project of “overcoming necessity” must now take place in the public sphere. (Arendt’s reluctant endorsement of this position is manifest in the quotation of Arendt, above p.66) The point I want to stress is that the erection and maintenance of the political sphere depends on its members’ ability to overcome necessity, which overcoming must, under conditions of modernity, take place in the social sphere.

The second position— that the social is non-political— involves the claim that the necessity-oriented concerns constitutive of the social are thoroughly non-political on the level of their contents. The consequence of this view is that, in principle, the question of access to the political sphere is itself thoroughly non-

³² Cf. the discussion of the household-*polis* relation in this thesis, pp. 9 ff.

political. Since the question of who gets to join the political sphere must necessarily pass through the question of who is emancipated from necessity, and since the question of emancipation from necessity is social, accessible only through technological-instrumental administrative categories, the question of who (if anyone) gets to join the political sphere is non-political. Surprisingly, Arendt appears to hold to this view just as firmly as (and less ambiguously than) she holds to the first.

Arendt always theorizes the social both as non-political and as a threat to the political. When the concern with overcoming necessity is introduced into the political realm, the result is always a reduction of politics to the level of the "life-process." In this spirit, Arendt writes that

It was under the rule of ...necessity that the multitude rushed to the assistance of the French Revolution, inspired it, drove it onward, and eventually sent it to its doom, for this was the multitude of the poor. When they appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them, and the result was that the power of the old regime became impotent and the new regime was stillborn; freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life-process itself. (OR, p.60)

It is worth noting that Arendt is never particularly sympathetic to the concerns of those for whom necessity remains unconquered. Her discussion of misery is intended to demonstrate the outcome of its infection of the public sphere. Arendt writes that:

We know what happened in France in the form of a great tragedy. Those who needed and desired liberation from their masters or from necessity, the great master of their masters, rushed to the assistance of those who desired to found a space for public freedom.-- with the inevitable

result that priority had to be given to liberation and that the men of the Revolution paid less and less attention to what they had originally considered to be their most important business, the framing of a Constitution. (OR, p.132)

Arendt's position is not that misery itself is tragic; rather, the tragedy arises at the moment when misery invades the public sphere and thereby destroys it. The following remark is telling about Arendt's position:

... these present-day worries of how to prevent the poor of yesterday from developing their own code of behaviour and from imposing it on the body politic, once they have become rich, were still quite absent from the eighteenth century... (OR, p.70)

Arendt's view is that the body politic cannot accommodate the poor *qua* poor. Once the condition of poverty has been overcome, the poor can join the body politic, provided they leave their poverty-inspired values and demands with them. Their demands for food, clothing, and shelter reflect their concern with overcoming nature, and as such have nothing to do with politics. Once they satisfy these demands (and thereby cease being poor,) and once they have left behind their orientation towards overcoming nature, they can enter the political realm.

The theory of power and the American case

It remains for me to convey Arendt's analysis of the American revolution's success. Her claim that the American revolution succeeded, and while the French revolution failed, because of the absence of misery in the American case, and its presence everywhere else, only tells half the story— and,

from the standpoint of my concern with Arendt's theory of the power, the **wrong** half of the story. The "misery" account amounts to the description of a threat to political-public space from which the Americans were spared. But Arendt also gives a positive statement of the cause of the American revolution's success: not only do the American revolutionary texts reflect a clear understanding of the importance of a political nature for freedom, the American Revolution itself was built on power. The American revolution was founded on power, on the web of human relationships constituted by the determination of men to stick by each other, to achieve goals together. Arendt expresses the crucial point through a description of the American revolutionary self-understanding:

The men of the American Revolution... understood by power the very opposite of a pre-political natural violence. To them, power came into being when and where people would get together and bind themselves through promises, covenants, and mutual pledges; only such power, which rested on reciprocity and mutuality... They themselves still knew very well what made them succeed, where all other nations were to fail: it was, in the words of John Adams, the power of 'confidence in one another...' (OR, p.184)

Excursus on Habermas: Arendt, Weber and the concept of power (IV)

Jürgen Habermas addresses Arendt's theory of power by contrasting it with Max Weber's; in so doing, he calls attention to the role of the theory of action in the theory of power. He writes that

Max Weber has defined power as the possibility of forcing one's will, whatever it may be, on the conduct of others. Hannah Arendt, by contrast, understands power as the capacity to agree in uncoerced communication, on some community action. Both

authors discuss power as a potency realized in actions, but each relies on a different model of action.³³ (PP, p.171)

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Habermas reads his own theoretical agenda into Arendt's thought: the identification of uncoerced communication oriented toward agreement as the centerpiece of Arendt's theory of power is, to put it bluntly, Habermas's invention. Pace Habermas, Arendt understands power to issue from the fact of collaborative action: collaborative action generates power. The question of how the goals of collective action are decided is not part of Arendt's theory of power, at least not in the first instance. (An attempt to flesh out procedures for the determination of collective goals based on Arendt's treatment of action in earlier texts may have some merit; Habermas does not attempt this, however.) Indeed, it is important to remember that power needs legitimacy, in Arendt's account; that is, a particular configuration of power can be illegitimate, and does not by virtue of that fact lose its status as a form of power.

Indeed, it is impossible to interpret Arendt's conception of power as focusing on "undistorted" communication without ignoring or dismissing elements of her theory which flatly contradict this principle. Consider, for example, Arendt's claim that

No government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed. Even the totalitarian ruler, whose chief instrument of rule is torture, needs a power base—the secret police and its net of informers. (OV, p.50)

³³ Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt: On the Concept of Power" in his Philosophical-Political Profiles. Frederick G. Lawrence, trans. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1983.

There is simply no way to reconcile Arendt's understanding of a "power base" made up of a secret police and a network of informers under the conditions of totalitarian rule guaranteed by torture with Habermas's conception of power emerging from uncoerced communicative action. Basically, Habermas projects his commitment to uncoerced, undistorted communication into Arendt's thought. In truth, there is simply no way to theorize "communicative distortion" as Habermas understands it within the Arendtian conceptual apparatus. Arendt does not mean that power emerges from consensus achieved in a particular way— as against some kind of non-power-generating collaborative action, perhaps— but that power emerges from the "web" of people bound to each other and working together.

It is interesting to note the "elective affinity" between the system-world vs. lifeworld distinction, central to Habermas's critical theory, and Arendt's opposition of "natural problems" to be solved through instrumental activity to concerns of the political sphere, which are always associated with the faculty of action. Ultimately, however, it must be recognized that Arendt's theory of the political sphere is never founded on a "communications concept" of action, but on a two-level concept of action: on the level of the individual, Arendt's theory of action is agonistic; on the level of the political sphere, the theory of action is collaborative-associational.

Chapter Five

Hannah Arendt's theory of the political sphere: a critique

In the three previous chapters, my objective was to represent Arendt's progressive development of the theory of the political public sphere under conditions modernity. I took her discussion of the ancient Greek polis as a starting point, and tracked the transformation of the theory through each of the three phases I identified: the initial formulation of the rise of the social (I), the introduction of reification and production in the theory of world (II), and the restatement of the theory of the political sphere through the theory of power (III).

At this juncture, I want to consider Arendt's theory of the political public sphere from a different standpoint. Whereas my initial perspective was analytical-exegetic—my objective was to represent and explain Arendt's theoretical commitments—I now want to turn to the question of their plausibility. In this final chapter of my thesis, I want to demonstrate some crucial problems arising in connection with Arendt's theory of the political sphere.

Specifically, I want to show that: a) Arendt's categorical distinction between the social and the political spheres (mirroring the distinction between the household and political spheres) is implausible; that b) her conception of both the household and social spheres, generated on the basis of her theory of nature, is implausible; that c) her conception of politics and the political sphere, purged as

it is of “the social” (that which ought to belong in the household sphere) is one-dimensional, inadequate; and that d) Arendt’s basic commitments with respect to the political sphere reflect her identification with the (retrospective) perspective of a powerful, emancipated group, whether or not it constitutes a “ruling class” as such, and have the consequence of rendering invisible, or mute, a series of crucial political claims, particularly those surrounding the vital question of access to the political sphere. Of course, the critical issues which I have listed above are by no means discrete; my arguments “run together” in each of these cases. I do not propose to address them in sequence, but corporately.

In the second part of this chapter, I argue that many of the problems to which I have alluded—and whose exposition is the business of the first part of the chapter—can be traced to Arendt’s basic epistemological and methodological commitments. I undertake an analysis of Arendt’s epistemological and methodological views through a critique of Seyla Benhabib’s interpretation of what she calls Arendt’s “odd methodology.”

As I have tried to show, Arendt’s basic political-philosophical move consists in the separation of the nature-based (household and social) spheres from the nature-transcending (political) sphere. Indeed, the three stages in Arendt’s progressive development of the theory of the political sphere consist in successive re-statements, or reformulations, of this opposition. The claim at the heart of this separation can fairly be stated in the following terms: those activities which are oriented towards success or struggle on the level of nature are categorically different from, belong in a different sphere than, those activities which are inherently political. In my view, the inadequacy of Arendt’s conception can be

demonstrated “from either side,” as it were: from the standpoint of the household or social spheres, whose activities are (unconvincingly) portrayed as moments in the “life process;” and also from the standpoint of the political sphere, which has been purged—absolutely—of activities captured under the umbrella of Arendt’s “nature” and “necessity.” I will first consider Arendt’s treatment of the “nature-based” spheres, and will then draw into focus her treatment of the political sphere.

The natural spheres: household and social

The problem of necessity

I want to consider two issues surrounding the way Arendt theorizes the “problem of necessity” at the heart of her conception of the household and social spheres.

(I) The first issue relates to Arendt’s basic understanding of “nature,” the “life-process,” the “cycle of life,” etc. With respect to the theory of the political sphere, Arendt uses “nature” as a sort of backdrop, or perhaps better, as a default setting: nature is that against which, in contrast with which, politics and the political sphere are built; until there is a political sphere, there is just nature. There is a sense in which the political sphere arises as a remedy, as a cure, for nature. Nature is associated with futility, with a lack of meaning—nature is synonymous with the undifferentiated “life-cycle,” with the ebb-and-flow of life

itself. Nature can be regarded as the realm of “unfreedom,” not in the sense that freedom is inhibited, canceled or withdrawn, but in the sense that freedom has not yet been introduced. On the level of nature, man exists only as a biological organism, motivated only by his body’s requirements, by the survival imperative.

In my view, Arendt’s conception of nature would merit criticism even if it were incidental from the standpoint of her social and political philosophy: her conception is arbitrary, under-developed, un-supported by arguments. While Arendt gives a rich description of “nature,” of the nature of “nature”— her colourful and compelling images succeed in conveying her idea of nature with remarkable clarity— she never gives a defense of this conception. How does Arendt know what she knows about nature? What is the epistemic status of Arendt’s concept of nature? Of course, Arendt’s concept of nature is far from peripheral in relation to her social and political thought: some of her major political-philosophical claims rest on it. Arendt’s conception of the household and social spheres— the nature-oriented spheres— depend on the success of her conception of nature— and thus, indirectly, so too does her conception of the political sphere.

At the outset, I want to draw attention to two peculiarities associated with Arendt’s treatment of nature. First, Arendt never explicitly theorizes “nature.” Rather, her concept of nature appears as an indispensable term in her explanation of other important concepts— the household and social spheres foremost among them. The closest Arendt comes to self-consciously developing a theory of “nature” is in her treatment of labour in the theory of world discussion. What I

have referred to as Arendt's theory of nature can just as accurately be called Arendt's theory of "life," of the "life itself," or of the "life process." The second point is that Arendt uses the term "nature" in two different connections. In the first connection, in which I am interested, nature is a synonym for the "life process." In a second connection, Arendt uses the term "nature" as a expressive synonym of "essence"— in the sense that a question about human "nature" is a question about the essence of man, or that a question about the "nature" of politics is a question about the essence of politics. (The two senses of "nature" come into contact when we ask about the "nature of nature.") My claims about Arendt's conception of "nature" refer to the first sense of the term.

It is also worth noting that Arendt's conception of "nature" is by no means identical with Aristotle's. On the level of Arendt's self-understanding, I think it is fair to say that Aristotle's theory of nature is not one of the elements of his thought which she intends to resurrect. Of course, Aristotle's conception of the household, of slavery, and of the state depend on his theory of nature; thus, any account which draws upon these draws on his theory of nature, however indirectly. However, I want to emphasize that Arendt's concept of nature cannot be derived from Aristotle, any more than Aristotle's can be discerned through an examination of Arendt's text.³⁴

³⁴ First, Aristotle's conception of nature is teleological; this cannot be said of Arendt's. The only *telos* operating on the level of nature in Arendt's thought is a survival and reproduction imperative. Beyond this major difference, however, there are dissimilarities at almost every level of their respective political theories, with respect to the question of nature. Cf. Aristotle's conception of the state-nature relation (Politics I ii 1253a1 "It follows that the state belongs to the class of objects that exist by nature...") Aristotle's conception of the state is such that it arises "naturally;" he argues against the idea that the state is an artifact. This is a cornerstone of Arendt's view: cf. her theory of "world." As I indicated in the first chapter of my thesis, however, I want to avoid the

On my analysis, at least three elements in Arendt's social and political thought hinge directly on her conception of nature:

- 1) Arendt's ability to separate the spheres, specifically her ability to generate the household and social spheres on the level of their contents— that is, on the level of their constitutive activities;
- 2) the plausibility of her strong claims about the norms and rules appropriate to the household and social spheres;
- 3) the direct description of the “social” as a threat to the political sphere by virtue of its “essence” as “natural,” or its “natural” inherent logic;

With respect to the first point, the following questions arise: How does Arendt know what is “natural”? How does she know what activities belong in a natural sphere? Arendt tells us that certain activities are “natural,” since they are oriented towards satisfying the demands of the biological organism, towards overcoming necessity. Activities belonging to this sphere ought to remain hidden, in Arendt's view. Arendt never gives an argument in support of the decision to generate spheres of activity (household, social) on the basis of the orientation towards necessity of their constitutive activities. Absent answers to these questions, the only way to generate pre-political or non-political spheres is by elimination— that is, by determining what does not belong in the political sphere, and creating a residual sphere on that basis. Of course, this is precisely **not** what

question of Arendt's interpretation of Aristotle wherever possible. Arendt's essay “The Concept of History,” anthologized in *Between Past and Future*, features a helpful discussion of Arendt's conception of nature. Cf. pp. 59-62. Arendt equates nature with the “given forces of the earth,” with “elemental forces...”

Arendt has in mind: in her view, nature is phenomenologically prior to politics, and can claim its own contents.

With respect to the second point, the question is: how can Arendt justify her normative claims about the activities characteristic of the “natural” spheres? Put crudely: how does Arendt know the “rules of nature?” Even if one were to accept Arendt’s claims about the contents of the natural spheres— even, that is, if one accepts that those activities oriented towards the overcoming of necessity belong in a sphere of their own, to be kept rigorously separate from the political sphere— one is still entitled to know where the rules and norms regulative of the social sphere derive their authority. Arendt’s ability to sustain her normative claims about the private-public distinction also depend on the answer to this question: on what basis Arendt justify her oft-repeated insistence that the nature-overcoming concerns of the social sphere ought to remain private, ought to remain hidden? What is it about “natural” concerns that urges their privacy? As it stands, Arendt substitutes assertion for argument.

With respect to the third point, the question is, what are the grounds for Arendt’s claims about the **inherent** threat to the political represented by the intrusion of “social” concerns into the public realm? I stress the word “inherent” here: Arendt’s claim is that the social, by virtue of its “naturalness,” has a tendency to spread, cancer-like, according to its “natural” inner logic; this is the thrust of Arendt’s claims about the “un-natural growth of the natural” presented by the social realm’s “never-ending expansion.”

(II) The second, related, issue centres on Arendt's claim that the concerns of the social and household spheres present problems of administration whose technical-instrumental solutions are to be determined by experts. Here, I want to rejoin my analysis in the previous chapter.³⁵ I want to show that Arendt's view that success in the "natural" spheres is a precondition for the erection and maintenance of the political makes it impossible to theorize the concerns of the household and social spheres exclusively through technical-instrumental administrative categories.

Arendt insists that the concerns of the "social" present exclusively instrumental-administrative problems. This claim may initially appear plausible enough, provided one adopts the perspective of those who have access to the political sphere: from their perspective, or from a theoretical perspective sympathetic to theirs, the realization of the conditions for the survival and the health of a political sphere—which conditions must be achieved in the "natural" spheres—do indeed have the appearance of an administrative question. Those people who have achieved freedom, like the citizens of the Greek *polis*, are conscious of a need to administer the household realm: its administration is the key to their freedom. And yet, the shortcomings of this view become apparent the moment one abandons the retrospective perspective originating within the political sphere. It may be that the only way to "solve the problem of nature" is through instrumental-technological means. What cannot be determined through

instrumental-technological categories, however, is the answer to the question, Who gets to overcome nature? In the service of whose emancipation from nature will instrumental activity be undertaken?

This problem is already apparent in Arendt's treatment of the household sphere in ancient Greece. The household is administered so as to guarantee the emancipation of its master. The activity of slaves in the household is administrative-technical; indeed, the slave serves as a tool for the achievement of the master's ends.³⁶ However, the generation of the goal which the slave strives to realize—the emancipation of the master from the thrall of nature, via the accomplishment of necessary tasks, such as, e.g., the provision of food—can itself hardly be theorized through technical-instrumental categories.

In my view, Arendt's decision to theorize the social sphere, whose emergence is the hallmark of modernity, on the basis of the household sphere as it is reflected in the self-understanding of the *polis*, has the effect of carrying forward the problems to which I have alluded. In basic terms, Arendt's position with respect to the *polis* is that given the techniques of administration available to the ancient Greeks, the achievement of freedom for a few men required the exclusion (or outright enslavement) of other men. In modernity, techniques of administration have been discovered which make servitude or enslavement flatly unnecessary from the standpoint of freedom. It is the discovery of these techniques, rather than an ideological commitment to universal human

³⁵ cf. The social as pre-political vs. non-political discussion in the previous chapter, pp. 68 ff.

³⁶ This is completely consistent with Aristotle. Cf. The Politics

emancipation, which has made slavery unnecessary. Arendt's discussion of slavery in On Revolution serves to illustrate the problem with this view. Arendt writes that:

All rulership has its original and its most legitimate source in man's wish to emancipate himself from life's necessity, and men achieved such liberation by means of violence, by forcing others to bear the burden of life for them. This was the core of slavery, and it is **only the rise of technology, and not the rise of modern political ideas as such, which has refuted the old and terrible truth that only violence and rule over others can make some men free.** (OR, p. 114) (bold mine)³⁷

The question for Arendt is whether she thinks that the "rise of technology" has made it the case that the choices of one group of free men and women are irrelevant with respect to the potential or actual freedom of another group of people. Unless Arendt is prepared to make this claim, then it is difficult to see how strict separation of the social and political spheres can be sustained, where the concerns of the social sphere allow for resolution exclusively through instrumental-technological categories. Of course, it is difficult to see this problem if, with Arendt, one persistently adopts the retrospective perspective of those who have achieved and secured their freedom. In the modern world, where the rise of the social includes the rise of an economic system, even if a "free group" does not

³⁷ It is interesting to consider Will Kymlicka's criticism of Communitarian thinkers in connection with Arendt's treatment of slavery. Kymlicka writes: "Communitarians often write as if the historical exclusion of certain groups from various social practices was just arbitrary, so that we can now include them and proceed forward. But the exclusion of women, for example, was not arbitrary. It was done for a reason—namely, that the ends being pursued were sexist, defined by men to serve their interests. ..." (CPP, p. 226) Arendt does not proceed as if the historical exclusion of women or slaves from the polis was arbitrary. Neither does she still think that "we can now include them and proceed forward..." The inclusion of the "others" is simply not a central concern for Arendt.

need to rule over another group through violence, it is nevertheless highly plausible that the freedom of one group is achieved in such a way as to make the freedom of another group impossible.

Thus, we see that the definition of the problem-to-be-solved in the social sphere itself clearly presents a normative political-ethical problem (requiring a solution similar in kind): what is the goal which is to be realized administratively? Who gets to be free? In the household or social spheres, who is to be fed, clothed and sheltered? Whose political sphere is to be sustained, made possible? Arendt's theoretical apparatus pre-supposes that a social goal has already been determined, such that it can be achieved administratively. Ironically, there is no way to locate the generation of this goal within Arendt's theoretical apparatus. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Arendt's conception of the social sphere as strictly non-political reflects an inability adequately to theorize (or, indeed, even to imagine) the species of claims for political inclusion arising outside of the political sphere, and her tendency to adopt the perspective of the ruling class justifying its relation to "other-groups".

Ultimately, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Arendt's conception of the social is strangely mismatched to the modern reality which it is intended to describe. Arendt's basic disposition towards modernity is perhaps the most perplexing element in her account: she repeatedly insists that the rise of the social, as such, is unfortunate, regrettable. Her oft-stated position is that those concerns which are oriented towards "necessity" ought never to enter into the public realm, but ought properly to be confined to the household sphere. When

one considers the nature of the institutions through which the various “problems of necessity” are addressed under modern conditions, however, the very intelligibility of the assertion that they ought to be re-inserted in the household sphere seems dubious. Consider some of the basic features of “necessity-mediation” in modernity: global currency markets; global markets for equities; unemployment-insurance and welfare systems; cartels, associations and marketing boards which regulate the price of certain commodities; food-quality regulatory agencies; health-care systems. It is difficult to imagine what a social re-inserted into the household sphere could possibly amount to, and what rationale there could possibly be for keeping this realm “shadowy.”

The political sphere

If, following Arendt, “politics” is defined in such a way that it describes something reminiscent of the *polis*, something that can be achieved only by people who are well-fed, clothed and sheltered, by people who have mastered necessity, then a second-level concept of “politics” is required in order to describe and mediate the claims arising from those outside the political sphere. If politics is purged of its “social” content, a sphere must be theorized in which those normative issues which escape reduction into technological-administrative categories can be expressed. This kind of second-level concept of politics—which would occupy an intermediate sphere, between Arendt’s political sphere and her social sphere—would contain most of the issues which are commonly thought of, and debated, as “political issues” in the modern occidental world.

Consider the following issues: pay equity for men and women; the level of state support for single parent families; the system of state-subsidized medical care; the system of unemployment insurance; all trade issues; affirmative-action hiring programmes... It is worth noting both that all of these issues are discussed as political issues in the contemporary context, and that all of them, without exceptions, would be excluded from Arendt's conception of the political.

Of course, Arendt does not entertain the possibility of such a second-level concept of politics. Rather, she formulates politics and the political sphere on the basis of her interpretation of the *polis*, and then effectively proceeds on the assumption that she has captured the "essence" of politics. Arendt does not merely claim possession of the term "politics," which would, after all, not be so serious, but also claims that her conception of politics is the only meaningful one. Arendt's attempt at conceptual clarification has the effect of clarifying out of existence a whole species of political claims and issues.³⁸ Arendt's conception of politics crowds out what I have referred to as "second-level" conceptions of politics, with the effect that claims articulated outside of the political sphere are silenced, or rendered unintelligible. As Habermas writes:

Arendt stylizes the image she has of the Greek polis to the essence of politics as such. This is the background of her favored conceptual dichotomies between the public and the private, between state and economy, freedom and welfare, political-practical activity and production—rigid dichotomies which modern bourgeois society and the modern state, however, escape. (Habermas 1994, p.219)

³⁸ In this respect, Arendt's procedure attracts criticism reminiscent of the ethnomethodology-inspired critique of Dorothy Smith, which points out the tendency of psychiatry and the social sciences to "erase" or render abnormal concerns which do not fit into patriarchal conceptual schemes imposed from a position of power or dominance. Cf. Dorothy Smith,

The decision to proceed on the basis of her “image” of the Greek polis results in the

... curious perspective that Hannah Arendt adopts: a state which is relieved of the administrative processing of social problems; a politics which is cleansed of socio-economic issues; an institutionalization of public liberty which is independent of the organization of public wealth; a radical democracy which inhabits its liberating efficacy at the boundaries where political oppression ceases and social repression begins— this path is unimaginable for any modern society. (Habermas 1994, p.220)

It is difficult to overstate the limitations of Arendt’s conception of politics as it originates in The Human Condition. Among the elements which do not find a place in Arendt’s theory of the political sphere is the question of justice. As Pitkin writes, “[t]he idea of justice, central for Aristotle, is conspicuously absent from Arendt’s otherwise closely parallel account.” (Pitkin 1994, p.273) It is interesting to note that a concern with justice figures prominently in Arendt’s The Origins of Totalitarianism, written ten years before The Human Condition, and again in Eichmann in Jerusalem, written five years later. Wolin gives the following assessment of Arendt’s The Human Condition:

In retrospect The Human Condition seems a work that is highly suggestive at the margins of its chosen problems and irrelevant, even misleading, at its center. There are marvelously perceptive comments about the nature of action and work, but the main construct, “the political,” could not carry the burden that was assigned to it. This was because two of the most important

political problems were either ignored or treated superficially: power and justice. (Wolin 1994, p.295)³⁹

Wolin's negative conclusion with respect to Arendt's concept of the "political" is entirely warranted, in my view; his diagnosis is inadequate, however. Wolin's claim is, essentially, that Arendt's conception of the political reflects inadequate attention to certain important issues, power and justice among them. Though I agree that these elements are lacking in Arendt's account, I find it impossible to see their absence as an oversight, in effect, as a problem which could have been remedied had Arendt not "treated superficially" some key issues. Rather, Arendt's theory of the political sphere, as it is introduced in The Human Condition, is determined and constrained by the basic theoretical commitments introduced from the moment of her discussion of the Greek *polis*. The issues raised by Pitkin and Wolin simply cannot be theorized within Arendt's theoretical apparatus, any more than inclusion-claims originating outside the political sphere, or the normative dimension of "social issues" (which make up most of what emerges as "political" in modern societies) can find expression there.

Epistemological and methodological commitments

At this stage, I want to introduce the question of Arendt's epistemological and methodological commitments. In my view, attention to Arendt's procedure of theory and concept formation helps to explain, if not to mitigate, the problems to

³⁹ Habermas specifies the respect in which Arendt's theory of power is lacking. He writes that "[t]he concept of the political must extend to the strategic competition for political power and to the

which I have drawn attention. More specifically, my claim is that clarity with respect to Arendt's epistemology-methodology helps to account for her commitment to a theory of politics and the political sphere which seems so inappropriate to its object—namely, the modern world. With this goal in view, I want to characterize Arendt's method of theory-formation, and the epistemological commitments which it reflects. I propose to undertake this task indirectly, however: I want to engage Arendt's epistemological and methodological commitments through a critique of Seyla Benhabib's treatment of what she calls Arendt's "odd methodology."

Benhabib's analysis of Arendt's methodology is oriented towards the demonstration that, appearances to the contrary, Arendt is not primarily a nostalgic "grossly misleading to read Hannah Arendt only or even primarily as a nostalgic thinker." (Benhabib 1994, p.75) She claims that Arendt's account of "the disappearance of the public realm ought not to be read as *Verfallsgeschichte* (a history of decline)..." Of The Human Condition, however, Benhabib concedes that "on one level, Arendt's text is a panegyric to the agonistic political space of the Greek *polis*." (Benhabib 1994, p.75) How can these (apparently competing) claims be reconciled? Benhabib argues that clarity with respect to Arendt's "odd methodology" reveals the appearance of nostalgia for the *polis* as an illusion, and succeeds in dispelling it. The "odd methodology" in question consists in Arendt's view of political theory as a form of storytelling. Benhabib writes that:

employment of power within the political system. Politics can not, with Arendt, be identified with the praxis of those who talk together in order to act in common." (Habermas 1994, p.224)

Viewed in this light, [Arendt's] story of the transformation of public space is an exercise in thought. Such thought exercises dig under the rubble of history to recover those pearls of past experience, with their sedimented and hidden layers of meaning, so as to cull from them a story that can orient the mind in the future. (Benhabib 1994, p.76)

Benhabib claims that this "odd methodology," characterized by political theory as storytelling, is the unifying link throughout Arendt's work. She writes that:

The vocation of the theorist as storyteller is the unifying thread of Arendt's political and philosophical analyses from the origins of totalitarianism to her reflections on the French and American Revolutions, to her theory of public space, and to... [The Life of the Mind.] (Benhabib 1994, p.76)

In my view, this interpretation is helpful, though it may be misleading if it is given too much emphasis. That is, it may overplay the substantive implications of Arendt's "storytelling" while underplaying the significance of the more important methodological tendency in Arendt, which is, in my view, her tendency towards essentialism and the reification of concepts.⁴⁰

Benhabib argues that there are actually two methodological tendencies in Arendt. On the one hand, Arendt is a political-theorist-as-storyteller, while on the other hand she is an phenomenologist inspired by Husserl and Heidegger. Thus, Benhabib writes that

Arendt's thought is not free of assumptions deriving from *Ursprungsphilosophie*, which posits an original state or temporal point to which one must trace back the phenomena to capture their "true" meaning... There are really two strains in Hannah Arendt's thought: one corresponding to the method of fragmentary

⁴⁰As I will show, Benhabib agrees that this methodological tendency is present in Arendt's work. Our disagreement turns on a) its importance relative to her "storytelling" and b) the significance of Arendt's "storytelling" in the first place.

historiography and inspired by Walter Benjamin, the other inspired by the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger and according to which memory is the mimetic recollection of the lost origins of phenomena as contained in some fundamental human experience. (Benhabib 1994, p.77)

Benhabib's claim about Arendt's method of fragmentary historiography seems to me to be entirely warranted, though I am sceptical about the claim's significance. Specifically, I fail to see how this claim militates against the view that Arendt is nostalgic for the *polis*. That Arendt practices fragmentary historiography does not, as best I can discern, serve to negate Arendt's persistent and explicit claims to the effect that the developments broadly constitutive of modernity have had negative consequences for public space and politics, which, for their part, **are always conceived by Arendt as identical with public space and politics under the conditions of ancient Greece.**

Benhabib considers Arendt's fragmented historiography and her phenomenology to be opposing, or at least discrete, tendencies. I want to argue that the tendencies outlined by Benhabib actually converge, in a way which she does not acknowledge. Arendt's "method of fragmented historiography" and her conceptual essentialism reflect two sides of the same coin, rather than distinct tendencies. The terminus of the demonstration of this convergence is, of course, my own statement of Arendt's basic epistemological and methodological commitments.

Nowhere is Arendt's epistemological self-understanding more clearly expressed than in her On Violence. There, Arendt writes that

It is... a rather sad reflection on the present state of political science that our terminology does not distinguish among such key words as "power," "strength," "force," "authority," and, finally, "violence"— all of which refer to distinct, different phenomena and would hardly exist unless they did. ... To use them as synonyms not only indicates a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which would be serious enough, **but is has also resulted in a certain blindness to the realities that they correspond to.** (OV, p.43)
(bold mine)

Some interpreters of Arendt see in this quotation a straightforward call for conceptual clarity, an uncontroversial commitment which ought to be embraced by theorists everywhere. In this spirit, Pat Duffy Hutcheon writes that:

... Hannah Arendt's great contribution to social science was her work on conceptual clarification— most particularly, her insights into the nature of power in human relations. ... I was immediately intrigued by Arendt's emphasis on the importance of maintaining meaningful distinctions among (sic) the concepts of "power," "strength," [... etc.] and on the need to employ the word "revolution" sparingly and concisely. ... I have had occasion many times since my first encounter with Arendt to mark how carelessness and ambiguity in the use of words both indicates and breeds fuzziness in thinking. This is dangerous in any context, but it can be downright catastrophic in a social science.⁴¹ (Hutcheon 1996, p.2)

In my view, this uncritical interpretation misses both the substantive thrust of Arendt's remark, and the curious theoretical perspective which it reflects. Specifically, it overlooks entirely Arendt's "correspondence theory" which links concepts and words, on the one hand, to phenomena, on the other. Arendt's claim that these many words must correspond to distinct phenomena, since if they did not, the words would hardly exist in the first place, amounts not to an injunction

⁴¹ Pat Duffy Hutcheon, "Hannah Arendt and the Concept of Power" Presented to the RCHS conference in Amsterdam. April 1996

against "fuzzy thinking," as Hutcheon thinks, but to an strong epistemological-ontological claim about the status of concepts and political phenomena. Also unacknowledged is Arendt's strong statement of the vocation of the political theorist, not only as story teller, but as sayer-of-names, such that political theory is above all in the business of revealing and naming phenomena, which would otherwise subsist and operate beneath the level of consciousness.

In this respect, we can detect an affinity with Jewish mysticism, possibly via Benjamin. The affinity with Jewish-mysticism, which might reflect Benjamin's influence or might be coincidental, consists in Arendt's conviction that phenomena have their own names, and that the discovery of these names confers, or makes possible, a certain power over them. Martin Jay, in The Dialectical Imagination, gives the following account of the presence of Jewish mysticism in Benjamin's thought, on the level of his theory of speech:

...Walter Benjamin had always been interested in the theological dimensions of speech. At the root of his theory of language was the belief that the world was created by the Word of God. To Benjamin, "In the beginning was the Word" meant that God's act of creation consisted in part in the bestowing of names. These names were of course perfectly expressive of their objects. However, man, created as he was in God's image, also had the unique gift of name-giving. But his names and God's were not the same. As a result, there developed a chasm between name and thing, and the absolute adequacy of divine speech was lost.⁴² (Jay 1996, p.262)

Of course, Arendt's thought does not reflect a theological view: the "absolute adequacy" of speech is not divine. Nevertheless, the emphasis on discovering

⁴² Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination. Berkeley: UCLA Press. 1996.

names perfectly expressive of their objects (the phenomena) is clearly present in Arendt's thought.

It may be objected that Arendt qualifies her methodological claims in On Violence in a way which calls into question my interpretation. After all, having defined power, violence, force, and authority, Arendt writes that

It is perhaps not superfluous to add that these distinctions, though by no means arbitrary, hardly ever correspond to watertight compartments in the real world, from which nevertheless they are drawn. (OV, p.46)

In my view, this qualification **confirms** my contention. When Arendt cautions that the distinctions are not drawn from "watertight compartments in the real world," she does not mean to caution that her distinctions do not originate in "compartments in the real world," but that these compartments are not watertight. That is, she claims that "nothing... is more common than the combination of violence and power, nothing less frequent than to find them in their pure and therefore extreme form." (OV, pp.46-47) The important point here is surely that the relative "purity" of power is not a property of concepts, but of the mode or circumstances of the phenomenon's appearance, such that the phenomenon of power appears most often in the company of the phenomenon of violence. Arendt explicitly claims that "[p]ower and violence, though they are distinct phenomena, usually appear together." (OV, p.52)

Having represented Arendt's understanding of the link in principle between concepts and their corresponding phenomena, the question remains: how does Arendt proceed to uncover these links? With this question, we move from an

examination of Arendt's epistemological self-understanding to an examination of her methodology. Arendt's method of concept formation—really a method of “concept discovery,” according to her self-understanding can be represented as a two-stage process. First, Arendt undertakes an examination of a “historical slice.” That is, she gives attention to a historical period, or a historical event. From this event, she culls an “essence.” That is, she discovers the concept which corresponds to the object-phenomenon. In a second movement, Arendt makes her concept—which was revealed to her through an exegesis of a particular historical “fragment” the basis for broad descriptive and normative claims.

This procedure is evidenced time and again in Arendt's work. Indeed, I am prepared to agree with Seyla Benhabib that Arendt's methodology provides the “unifying link” in her work (of course, we disagree about the proper characterization of that methodology.⁴³) Consider Arendt's theory of “world” in The Human Condition. The “world” is built through the exercise of the human capacity to work, to make things, so that man's instrumentality opposes the flux of nature and guarantees some measure of human permanence. Arendt anticipates

⁴³ This tendency is clearly at work in The Origins of Totalitarianism: In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt's theories of imperialism, nationalism, tribal nationalism, etc., reflect the tendency I have described. Arendt examines the case of France, the nation-state par excellence, and discovers the essence of “true,” or “pure” nationalism. Other phenomena which lack the essential characteristics of nationalism, e.g., the nation's appropriation of the state, the long association and identification of the nation with a particular territory, simply cannot count as nationalisms, though they may be related to it. Thus, Arendt specifies that tribal nationalism is not really a form of nationalism, since it does not reflect nationalism's essential characteristics of territoriality and development within the political structures of a state, but is instead conditioned by the experience of “rootlessness.” It is important to note that Arendt never considers reformulating her theory of nationalism, never opts to make it more flexible, so that both “classical” nationalism and tribal nationalism can take their place under its umbrella. Indeed, Arendt feels compelled to formulate a “bridge theory” to account for the similarity of both phenomena. Clearly, Arendt is not concerned about over-generalizing, about universalizing what might be the accidental characteristics of a particular form of nationalism.

the objection that, according to her theory, the nomad, whose experience cannot be interpreted via the category "work," does not have a world; her response to this objection is, simply: Correct. The nomad, according to Arendt, is worldless. Once Arendt has culled an essence from a "historical fragment"—once, that is, she has matched a concept to a phenomenon—she makes the concept the basis for interpretative and normative claims about other events, and appears never to look back.

One significant consequence of Arendt's procedure of theory formation is a certain imperviousness of her theoretical claims to counter-evidence and criticism. Arendt's epistemological commitments, such that the "essences" of phenomena have revealed themselves to her, give her a philosophical-theoretical justification for disregarding what might otherwise appear as problems with her theory. Arendt's treatment of the question of slavery in On Revolution provides an excellent example of this process at work. Having just argued that the specific difference between the American and French Revolutions is the absence of "misery," and thus of the "social question," in the former case, Arendt casually concedes that there was "misery" in the American case after all. She writes that

... the absence of the "social question" from the American scene was, after all, quite deceptive, [since] ...abject and degrading misery was present everywhere in the form of Negro labour. (OR, p.70)

This observation does not prompt Arendt to re-think her position, however; indeed, it is difficult to discern what significance she ascribes to it, if any. And

yet, her observation has the effect of flatly contradicting her argument: surely, some explanation of its significance, or of its non-significance, is in order.

In my view, the epistemological and methodological consideration which I have introduced helps to explain Arendt's ability to deal with the fact of American misery, in the form of Negro labour, as something other than counter-evidence. My claim is that Arendt proceeds as if her conceptual opposition between the political and the social spheres had priority over the events which are intended to illustrate it. Throughout my thesis, I have tried to show that Arendt's social and political thought consistently operates on the basis of a distinction between the "natural" spheres, on the one hand, and the political sphere, on the other. Just as consistently, Arendt theorizes the threat to the political sphere as its invasion by "natural" elements. This pattern is repeated in Arendt's analysis of the American and French Revolutions. The success of the former is explained in terms of the integrity of its political sphere (theorized on the basis of the theory of power.) The failure of the latter is explained by the penetration of the political sphere by the "social," here represented by the problem of "misery." Thus, the question of slavery in the American case is peripheral from Arendt's standpoint: the problem of the American Revolution has already been solved: the political sphere was not penetrated by social concerns. Arendt's claim about the "absence of misery on the American scene" is really a claim about the absence of "political sphere-penetrating social concerns on the American scene." In On Revolution, "misery" simply operates as a stand-in for the "social," which is destined to be the

preferred concept, along with the “political,” in an explanation of historical events.

Of course, my epistemological and methodological reflection on Arendt was intended not to explain particular difficulties in Arendt’s texts, but to throw light on the question of her commitment to a concept of politics and the political sphere which, in Habermas’s words, “... when applied to modern societies, leads to absurdities.” (Habermas 1994, p.220) In my view, Arendt’s formulation of politics and the political sphere under conditions of modernity is conditioned by the epistemological and methodological tendencies which I have outlined. Arendt’s self-understanding is such that she has apprehended the essence of politics through her reflection on the *polis*— that is, she has uncovered the phenomenon of politics, has restored the concept appropriate to this phenomenon. The same applies to Arendt’s conception of the household sphere: in the course of her reflection on the *polis*, she comes into an encounter with the phenomenon of nature-oriented activity, and formulates the concept appropriate to it. The nature-freedom opposition, and its attendant conceptual apparatus, assumes a central position in Arendt’s political thought. This basic opposition, whose validity Arendt never questions, is reproduced at every significant juncture in Arendt’s social and political thought as it is developed in The Human Condition, On Revolution, and On Violence. Arendt’s account of the rise of the social, in which she laments the entry into the public realm of “necessity-oriented concerns,” insisting that these are appropriate to the household sphere, almost completely bypasses modern economic categories: this reflects the priority of Arendt’s

interest in fleshing out her conceptual apparatus over her interest in describing the reality of the modern world.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ One is reminded of Harold Garfinkel's famous ethnomethodological treatment of the "documentary method," in which a sense of reality is sustained by reading a prior theory into a set of facts—by reading the facts as evidence of the theory's truth, in effect. Dorothy Smith's critique of patriarchal thought, which I suggested earlier could be re-deployed as a critique of Arendt, is rooted in ethnomethodology.

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