

The Greek Philosophers Against Arendt

Abstract: Though Arendt was ambivalent about philosophy, much of her work shows careful and sustained engagement with ancient Greek philosophers, in particular, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. This paper explores the distinctive ways in which Arendt uses these Greek philosophers, explains why she uses these philosophers in particular, and assesses whether her rethinking of the tradition of Western political thought they inaugurated on her view, is coherent. I argue that Arendt's appropriation of their ideas puts a strain on her own account at various points; as she seeks to wrestle Socrates from Plato, and Aristotle from all essentialism, she raises questions about the trajectory and grounds of her own political theorizing. Since attention to the use of these thinkers exposes obscurities and tensions in her account, this paper allows the Greek philosophers to fight back, by reading her deployment of them against her own theorizing.

'The title 'political philosopher', which I avoid, is extremely burdened by tradition. When I talk about these things I always mention that there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics... There is a kind of enmity against politics in most philosophers. I want to look at politics with eyes unclouded by philosophy', Interview with Gunter Grass (1964).

Arendt was ambivalent about philosophy and yet the springboard for much of her reflection on politics is an engagement with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Nowhere is this clearer than in her work *The Human Condition*. This text is intimately related to issues discussed in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, because she held that political thought had been ruptured with the totalitarian events of the 20th century and the established categories of political thought needed rethinking.¹ It is to “think what we are doing” (*Human*, 5) and restore meaning and dignity to the political sphere, that she returns to the Greeks. Though much of Arendt's account of Western philosophy inherits its framework from Heidegger's history of Greek philosophy, her attention to

¹ In 'Tradition and the Modern Age', *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Penguin Classics: 2006) p26, she argues that “Totalitarian domination as an established fact...has broken the continuity of Occidental history”. For the importance of the *Origins of Totalitarianism* as the context for Arendt's thinking in the *Human Condition*, see M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: 1992).

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle speaks to her specific concerns: they provide tools to explore the value of political agency and action, and how these came to be degraded.² Arendt explores ideals of a humanity revealed in political action, which provides the expression of an authentic human freedom, and which, she argues, was degraded by Plato. Plato's despair at the death of Socrates motivated a turn towards the inner life, and a flight from the political realm, which left it devoid of integrity and meaning.³ Though Heidegger too locates the moment of our 'fall' with Plato's *Republic*, our 'forgetfulness of Being', Arendt's reading of Plato, by contrast, highlights our 'forgetfulness of the political'.⁴ Arendt's thinking is more subtle than criticisms that focus on the supposed totalitarianism of Plato's *Republic*;⁵ the point is that certain conceptual moves made by Plato, and to some extent endorsed by Aristotle, degraded the sphere of politics and prepared the way for the transformation of the political sphere into a realm concerned with 'necessity', where it became subservient to economics and the labor market, on the one hand, and to private, social, concerns on the other. It was these conditions, she explains in the *Origins*, that provided the ground for totalitarianism to take root.⁶

The aim of this paper is to explore (i) the ways in which Arendt uses Greek philosophers, (ii) explain why she uses *these* philosophers, and (iii) to assess whether her rethinking of the tradition of Western political thought is coherent. As we shall see, Arendt is concerned not only with a "pre-philosophical articulation" of Greek *polis* life; nor does she simply condemn philosophy for destroying the "quintessential expression of freedom and power" characteristic of democratic Athens.⁷ Arendt's

² As Leonard argues, in her treatment of the ancients, "Arendt articulates her distance from and rejection of Heidegger and other aspects of the German intellectual tradition". See M. Leonard, 'Hannah Arendt and the Ancients: Preface', *Classical Philology* 113 (2018) pp1-5, p2.

³ She argues that the gulf between philosophy and politics opened historically with the trial and death of Socrates, 'Philosophy and Politics', *Social Research*, vol. 57, no 1 (1990) p73.

⁴ On which, see H. Brunkhorst, 'Equality and Elitism in Arendt', in ed. D. Villa, *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: 2006) pp178-198, p196 and D. Villa, 'Arendt and Socrates', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol 53 (1999) pp241-257.

⁵ Arendt does not commit the methodological error Skinner identifies as the "mythology of prolepsis", one example of which he identifies as "the attempt to consider Plato's political views in the *Republic* as that of a totalitarian party politician", Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' in (ed.) J. Tully, *Meaning and Contexts: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (1988) pp29-68, p44. For what Monoson has termed the "stubborn endurance" of the idea of Plato as a proto-totalitarian, see S. Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy* (Princeton: 2000), p13 with K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The Spell of Plato* (1945/1971).

⁶ This also supports a larger concern in the *Human Condition* with the ills of the modern age, characterized by "a loss of the world". By this Arendt means the loss of the public sphere of action and speech in favour of the private world of introspection (heralded by the philosopher's privileging of contemplation) and the pursuit of economic interests.

⁷ As Euben argues in P. Euben "Arendt's Hellenism" in ed. D. Villa, *ibid.* pp 151-164, p 151.

reading of the Greek philosophers is more pluralistic and some of their ideas play a positive role in her account. As I hope to show, though, Arendt's appropriation of these ideas puts a strain on her own account at various points; as she seeks to wrestle Socrates from Plato, and Aristotle from all essentialism, she raises questions about the trajectory and grounds of her own political theorizing. Since attending to the use of these thinkers exposes obscurities and tensions in her account, this paper will read the Greek philosophers *against* Arendt.

1. *Labor, Work and Action with Aristotle*

Human beings must actualize the sheer passive given-ness of their being, not in order to change it, but to make it articulate and to call into existence what they would have to suffer anyhow” (The Human Condition, p 208).

Central to Arendt's attempt to recapture the lost value of political life is an account of action and its importance for human freedom. This is, first and foremost, why she returns to the Greeks, arguing that “a freedom experienced in the process of acting and nothing else has never again been articulated with the same classical clarity”.⁸ The *Human Condition* argues for the priority of action over two other categories she views as fundamental to the active life: labor and work. Labor, work and action are three activities she sees as fundamental to the human condition “because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life has been given to man”, namely that we are living beings, that we inhabit a world of our own making, and that we share the world with other people (*Human*, 1.7). Each of these activities is assessed in terms of its ability to meet these conditions of human life, and in terms of its contribution to human self-realization and freedom. Influenced by the Greek idea that what is distinctive of man is something he alone can do, in separation from an animal, biological nature, she distinguishes between that ‘what’ of human existence, which we share with nature, and the ‘who’ of an agent, which “we define only by distinction”. ‘Who’ we are is revealed in action, separated from those activities which show ‘what’ we are as mortal beings. To act, she writes, is a kind of second birth (*Human*, p176), it means to take an initiative: “this is not the beginning of something, but of somebody who is a beginner himself” (*Human*, p177). This capacity to begin

⁸ ‘What is Freedom’ in *Between Past and Future*, pp142-170, p165.

something new – what she terms “the fact of our natality” is illustrated with a quotation from Augustine: “that a beginning be made, man was created” (*De Civitate Dei*, xii 20).⁹ To act in a way that reveals ‘who’ as opposed to ‘what’ we are, and to forge a new beginning in the world, we must be able to act in our separateness from those activities which inhibit our freedom of action by being grounded in the given-ness of nature. In the activity of labor, she argues, we are dealing with a biological nature, shared with animals, which is tethered to the conditions of mortality: for example, biological needs for food, shelter and reproduction. She takes from the Greeks the notion that labor was linked to the necessities of life and closely connected with fate. As such, she argues, freedom cannot come to man as a laboring animal, trapped as we are in a cycle of needs, pains and replenishments.¹⁰ In labor the individuality of each is submerged by being bound to a chain of natural necessities. In this activity, we show only sameness- the fact that we belong to the human species and must take care of our bodies. In work (where we create and maintain a world for human use), we can show ‘who’ we are, as opposed to ‘what’ we are as human beings to some extent because products of work bear the marks of their maker, but insofar as the value of work requires submission to some standard for the making, and against which the products of work are to be judged, we fail to disclose ourselves in this activity in our unique distinctness as individuals. Action, the third category of the active life can, by contrast, mark a new ‘beginning’, and in that way express ‘natality’: for action, she writes, “is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work”.¹¹ In that way, it is not the ‘beginning of something’ – i.e. a means to the satisfaction of some need, or to the end of some product, but the beginning ‘of somebody’ and, as such, can be the origin of the principle of freedom (*Human*, p177).

For Arendt, Greek *polis* life preserved this space of freedom, that is, a space for action, in separation from labor and work. Arendt is not committed to the thought that Greek democratic theorizing of this period, such as it was, makes these views

⁹ Arendt began her career with a study of love in St. Augustine for her doctoral thesis with Karl Jaspers. Though it is not easy to track the continuity between this and her later, more explicitly political, writings, appreciating the centrality of the concept of neighborly love for the foundation of political communities is central. Augustine’s influence in the *Human Condition*, is seen most clearly in the principle of ‘natality’, however.

¹⁰ Compare Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (trans. Grene): “Against necessity, against its strength, no one can fight and win” with *Human*, p3, p16: “Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity”.

¹¹ She argues that “action is what goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter” (*Human*, p211).

explicit;¹² rather she uses Thucydides, and Aristotle, to articulate what she sees as its conceptual framework and to theorize its value. Central is the insight of Pericles in Thucydides' Funeral Oration: "We Athenians alone consider the man who takes no part in public life not as one minding his own business, but rather a good-for-nothing" (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.40.2). The Funeral Oration explores how democratic life provided citizens with the opportunity to participate in public life, a service that does not go without honor and glory. Even those who cannot make the most glorious contribution to the city, namely dying in battle, can nonetheless deliberate and educate action (2.43). This service to the common good of the city, the performance of fine actions in, or for the sake of the *polis*, can bring to citizens a glory to radiate across the generations. By saying that without this opportunity, man is "a good for nothing", Pericles is suggesting (to Arendt) that such activities show 'who' a man is, which is to say that the shining brightness of action in the *polis* allows us to realize a distinctively human freedom.

Arendt interprets these remarks through Aristotle's *Politics* Book I; man is a political animal (1253a), which is to say that participation in *polis* life allows us to realize something distinctive of man qua man.¹³ Aristotle provides the tools to explore why that is. Arendt holds that action in the Greek *polis* was sharply distinguished from life in the private sphere – the *oikos* – and had a non-economic sense of purpose, strictly separated from the activities of commercialism and trade. This can be seen in criteria for citizenship, which ensured that only those freed to some extent from the necessities of life were able to participate in this sphere of free action. Arendt uses Aristotle's distinction between the household and the *polis* found in *Politics* 1 (*Human*, p28-37) to theorize the value of this distinction. As Aristotle argues, though the *polis* comes into being for the sake of life (by which is meant dealing with our biological needs and possibly also work and trade) it exists for the sake of the *good* life, the performance of fine actions, *Politics* 9. 1280a31-4:

¹² Accounts of Greek democracy are put together from comments on democratic practices in drama, oratory and historical writings, which show an interest in specific practices, or institutions, and civic ritual performances and other cultural practices. It is difficult to make the claim that there is a body of systematic theorizing at this time. See Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements*, p6.

¹³ It is not clear that Arendt's use of Aristotle is precise enough to capture his sense of the *polis* as the most complete form of political *koinonia*, or whether her notion of 'participation' in political life can capture his 'having a share in *krisis* and *arkhe*' (1275a). On her desire to distance herself from any teleological understanding of the *polis*, see below.

It is for the sake of *kalai praxeis*, beautiful and noble actions and not for the sake of surviving together, that political associations exist (1281a2-3).¹⁴

The division between the sphere of political action, where we achieve the good life, and those human activities concerned with the preservation of our biological and social lives, is crucial to Arendt's interpretation of the political sphere as the realm of freedom, and to her separation of action from 'labor' and 'work'. By separating the household and the private sphere, the place where necessity ruled, and protecting the public realm of the *polis*, she argues that the Greeks preserved this sphere of freedom.¹⁵ This robust distinction between the household, economic sphere, and the public realm, was (she argues) eclipsed in Aquinas' mistranslation of Aristotle's *zoon politikon* into the *animale sociale* (*Human*, p23), which suggests the political is equated with the social and blurs this important distinction. For Arendt, what is central to Aristotle's *political* animal, is that he is liberated from 'necessity' and related social concerns, and in virtue of this he can exercise freedom, expressed in *kalai praxeis*. By doing this, the civic association becomes the proper space for the 'disclosure' of the agent, in separation for his laboring and work; for it is in that separation that 'who', as opposed to 'what', we as human beings can be shown, which corresponds to a moment of 'natality' – a kind of second birth, revealed in action (*Human*, p176).

The second key distinction Arendt adopts (and reworks) from Aristotle is that between action (*praxis*) and work, or production (*poiesis*). It is used to argue for the failure, now of work, to secure our self-realization and freedom. Aristotle argued as follows:

Doing and making are generically different, since making aims at an end distinct from the act of making, whereas in doing the end cannot be other than the act itself; doing well is itself the end.¹⁶

Arendt used this distinction to show that the value of work, unlike action, has its source of value outside of itself, in some end-product (*Human*, p154-7). The power,

¹⁴ cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1161a34-5.

¹⁵ Compare "What is Authority", *Between Past and Future*, pp 91-142, p117 on this point: "the freedom of the good life rests on the domination of necessity", as she held the Greeks saw correctly.

¹⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1140b3-6.

or potential character, of action, by contrast, ‘exists only in its actualization’ (*Human*, p200). There is an intimate connection between *dunamis* (power) and *energeia* (actuality) in the activity of *praxis*, which is severed in the case of *poiesis*; in the latter case, the *dunamis* of production is a means that comes to an end in a product that falls outside of the fabrication process. In this way, acts of production require us to employ means-end reasoning and make us likely to turn ends into further means, so depriving the activity itself of telic value (*Human*, p154-7).¹⁷ As Aristotle puts it:

. . . in some cases, the activity is the end, in others, the end is in some product beyond the activity. In cases where the end lies beyond the action the product is naturally superior to the activity (*N.E.* 1094a).

Aristotle says only that the product is superior to the activity in such cases, and not that the activity itself is deprived of all value. But Arendt reads this in a strong way to isolate a strand of *praxis* that contains its source of value within itself. In cases of *poiesis*, she argues, it is not just that the value resides in the product, outside of the activity, but that insofar as acts of creation conform to some end independent of the making itself, which serves as a standard for the making, *homo faber* loses the battle for unique self-disclosure in his submission to this standard. Armed with this further thought, Arendt argues that a free and distinctively human action must be one that discloses the agent in his separateness from this activity, too. Though Aristotle argued that some actions can be valuable for their own sake *and* for the sake of some further end, Arendt argues that a distinction between actions valuable for their own sake and actions useful for some further end is one that finds expression in Aristotle’s *Politics* between *poiesis* in the household and *praxis* in the *polis*; the division between the household and the *polis* is a form of that distinction (1094a18-22). This allows Arendt to clarify the value of the *polis*: the necessity and constraint of household productions stand in opposition to the freedom of action in the *polis*.¹⁸

¹⁷ For Arendt, work or *poiesis* is linked to violence because of this instrumentality; for if the value resides in the end-product, then the means can justify the end, however violent (*Human*, p139: “violence is present in all fabrication, and *homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature”). See D. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: 1995) p27 and J. Taminiaux, ‘Athens and Rome’, in ed. D. Villa, *ibid.* (2006): pp165-177, p168-9.

¹⁸ This deals with an objection that might be raised in light of R. Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton: 2001), who argues that the Aristotelian *polis* included much of what we would consider to be social life and so the public/private distinction is not one that can be easily transposed to ancient Greece. Arendt has a specific conception of the public sphere as distinct from both biological necessity and *poiesis*, and as the realm of *kalai praxeis*. This notion distances itself from the social wherever that may, in fact, fall on the Greek conception.

There are further reasons, beyond the protection it affords from labor and work, that explain why action requires an organization such as the *polis*: “action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possibly only in the public realm” (*Human*, p180).¹⁹ As the dead of the war were glorified by Pericles’ Oration, and Achilles needed Homer to secure his *kleos* (roughly ‘fame’), so we need each other ‘to make [our] appearance explicitly’ and ensure that our ‘passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and appearing before an audience of fellow men’ (*Human*, p197-8). In this way, ‘plurality’ and ‘publicity’ are required because these conditions ‘multiply the occasions to win immortal fame, that is to show who he was in his unique distinctness’ (*Human*, p197). The *polis*, then, becomes a “space of appearance”, which requires “a web of human relationships” (*Human*, p283) as its necessary context.²⁰ As we will see, the winning of fame is a notion that sits uneasily in a context that has drawn so much from Aristotle; for why not suppose that the winning of fame sets external conditions on the kinds of actions that are of value and therefore threatens to place them closer to case of ‘work’? Aristotle, for one, thinks that honor, cannot be the *telos* of a flourishing life since it relies on the assessment of other people (*N.E.*, 1095b23-30; 1159a22-27). More on this shortly.

Though some of Arendt’s language here is drawn from Homer, she is aware that the egoism of the Homeric hero and the competitive spirit of self-assertion (*Human*, p41), which “stresses the urge towards self-disclosure at the expense of all other factors” (*Human*, p194), can be at odds with civic life.²¹ But Arendt’s account is constrained by Aristotle, who marks the movement away from the violent action of the Homeric hero to that of speech as the privileged form of political action. Man achieves *kleos* as “*a zoon logon ekhon*”, a living being capable of speech; though we possess speech before the establishment of the political realm, it can only be realized fully in the space of the *polis*. The reason for this is not, as it is for Aristotle, that we are realizing an essential human nature in this expression; it is rather that there is a

¹⁹ Elsewhere she calls the *polis* ‘the space of appearances where [individuals can] act...a kind of theatre where freedom [can] appear’, in ‘What is Freedom’, *Between Past and Future*, p154.

²⁰ Some of this is more clearly expressed in ‘What is Freedom’, *Between Past and Future*, p154: where she talks of the *polis* as the realm where freedom is a worldly reality: “tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which are talked about, remembered and turned into stories before they are finally incorporated into that the great storybook of human history”.

²¹ On the tension between the agonal and individualistic view of politics with co-operative participation in public affairs, see B. Parek, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (Palgrave Macmillan: 1981) p177 and G. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Rowman and Littlefield: 1984) p 7, p43.

“revelatory quality of speech and action” (*Human*, p180) which reveals ‘who’ the agent is in his distinctness from others. Without the accompaniment of speech, she argues, “action would not only lose its revelatory character but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject,” the agent (*Human*, p178). She writes as follows:

Action and speech go on between men, as they are directed toward them, and they retain their agent revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively “objective,” concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arises their specific, objective, worldly interests. These interests constitute, in the word’s most literal sense, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together. Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly, objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent” (*Human*, p182).

It is through speech that we can disclose who we are to our fellow men, and the public realm is the place where everyone can “be seen and heard” (*Human*, p50, p57). For this to obtain, the specific hallmarks of plurality, which she calls “equality and distinction”, are required (*Human*, p175). For it is only as equals that men can understand each other, and only as distinct that they can bring a unique perspective to events. That is why we need a *political* space, which is to say, a space where people meet as equals, neither being ruled, nor ruling over others; for this is something not derived from their nature as human beings, but from their status as citizens.²²

For Arendt, an organization such as the *polis* both protected this space of free disclosure and provided the conditions for “immortalizing praise”, such as that of Pericles in his Funeral Oration. In acting as a space for “organized remembrance” (*Human*, p198), the *polis* was for the Greeks the guarantee against the fragility of

²² “The equality of the Greek *polis*, its isonomy, was an attribute of the *polis* and of men who received their equality by virtue of citizenship, not by virtue of birth” (*On Revolution* (Penguin Classics: 2009) p31). This is contrasted with private and social spheres of life; for in the private realm people meet not as equals but as intimates bound by friendship and personal commitments. The public realm is where you enjoy equal status with all members, and it provides the space to speak and listen to each other with regard for that equality. In ‘What is Freedom?’, *Between Past and Future*, p149, she writes that: “without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance”.

human life (*Human*, p203).²³ In what can only be described as a creative misreading of Aristotle, Arendt re-inscribes Aristotelian immortality within the *polis*:

The famous passage in Aristotle: ‘Considering human affairs one must not...consider man as he is and not consider what is mortal in mortal things, but think about them only to the extent that they have the possibility of immortalizing’ occurs very properly in his political writings.

As Arendt knows well, the passage occurs in Aristotle’s *Ethics*, not his *Politics* (as her correct citation of *N.E.* 1177b31 indicates). Her very different use of this passage elsewhere, in which she argues that Aristotle, like Plato, privileges contemplation over political action, indicates her awareness that this was Aristotle in Platonizing mode.²⁴ Her reading wrestles Aristotle away from his Platonic heritage – his wrong move, according to her, and she re-reads Aristotle’s focus on ‘immortality’ in Homeric/political terms to preserve what she sees as Aristotle’s central insight into man as a political animal: what it means to consider man ‘as he is’ and what is mortal in mortal things is to consider us as biological beings tethered to necessity; what it means for us ‘to immortalize’ is for us to engage in *kalai praxeis* in the public realm. In this way, man achieves *kleos* through speech in the *polis*, not violence on the battlefield (contra the Homeric hero), nor through an asocial rationality expressed in contemplation (contra Plato).

2. *Tensions with Aristotle*

Arendt’s account of political agency and action is inspired not just from the Greek *polis* organization, but theorized productively with Aristotle as the spokesperson of the *bios politikos*.²⁵ Though it has been argued that there is “no evidence that any Athenian justified participation in the city’s democratic institutions by reference to personal fulfilment”, the transformation of Athenian civic freedom into a “characterological virtue” is clearly – and arguably rightly - inspired by Aristotle

²³ “The organisation of the *polis* is a kind of organized remembrance. Not historically, of course, but speaking metaphorically and theoretically, it is as though the men who returned from the Trojan War had wished to make permanent the space of action which had arisen from their deeds and sufferings, to prevent its perishing with their dispersal and return to their isolated homesteads” (*Human*, p198).

²⁴ In *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, vols 1 and 2 (Harvest/HBJ Book: 1981), Chapter III: 15, she argues that this passage is “entirely Platonic”.

²⁵ As D. Villa has argued in *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: 1995) p3 and Chapter 2.

(though he was a metic, not strictly speaking, an Athenian), and his understanding of man as a *zoon politikon* and a *zoon logon ekhon*.²⁶ Leaving aside the issue of whether her use of Aristotle is precise enough to capture his teleological sense of the *polis* as the most complete form of political *koinonia*, and whether political participation is too loose to capture his notion of ‘having a share in *krisis* and *arkhe*’ (1275a), some of her Aristotelianism poses problems for her view of politics. First, one might wonder how Arendt’s fusion of Aristotle and Homer is supposed to work. For the point about *praxis* (for Arendt, at least) is that it is radically autotelic, but the *kleos* of Achilles is dependent on Homer; “without him, everything is futile” (*Human*, p194). If Achilles needs Homer then his actions are not completed with the doing of the deed, but require something further to secure his *kleos*. If so, to what extent is this a case of doing where ‘the end cannot be other than the act itself; doing well is itself the end’ (*NE* 1140b3-6 with *Human*, p206)? This Homeric addition to the model is crucial for Arendt to ensure that ‘publicity’ and ‘plurality’ play a role in her notion of action; for without the cooperative activity of others, action would not require the plural, public, conditions of political life. But if Achilles and Homer provide a model of how this works, then it seems that Arendt is re-describing a privileged subset of actions, and whether the end is internal or external seems arbitrarily conceived. If Achilles is considered thus, why not the craftsman? Could we re-describe their productions so that the value gained from their products is also somehow included in the *telos* of their activity, just as the value gained from Homer is supposedly included in the action of Achilles? This would be to miss the emphasis here; though her use of Homer emphasizes the conception of the *polis* as a space of organized remembrance, the point is not to suggest that the value of the action resides in the *memory* of the deed, rather than in the deed itself.

The words of Pericles, as Thucydides reports them, are perhaps unique in their supreme confidence that men can enact and save their greatness at the same time and, as it were, by one and the same gesture, and that the performance as such will be enough to generate *dynamis* and not need the transforming reification of *homer faber* to keep it in reality (*Human*, p205).

²⁶ By Campbell, ‘Paradigms lost: Classical Athenian Paradigms and Modern Myth’, *History of Political Thought*, vol x, no. 2 (1989) 207. For a response to Arendt’s supposed idealism of the Greek *polis*, see P. Euben, “Arendt’s Hellenism” in ed. D. Villa, *Cambridge Companion*, pp151-64, p162.

The power, or potential character, of action “exists only in its actualization” (*Human*, p200). The point, then, cannot be that Achilles is dependent on “the transforming reification” of Homer, nor that disclosure is dependent upon the collective memory of a community such as the *polis*. Rather, the idea seems to be that to distinguish oneself in the manner of Achilles, for example, to show ‘who’ one is, others are required from whom one is distinct, and towards whom one can show that distinctness. Indeed, the notion of “immortalizing” seems to be more of a qualitative notion, akin to greatness, or “virtuosity” as she sometimes calls it (*Revolution*, p98). Seen in this way, it is the mode in which freedom appears – its “shining brightness” - and not a goal separate from this end, dependent upon a memorializing product. ‘Plurality’ and ‘publicity’ are less agents of memory, and more the conditions required for the expression of a unique ‘distinctness’. In this way, Arendt preserves the Aristotelian insight about *praxis*, with the goal and value firmly located within the activity.

A further issue is how to secure a space within which each participant can show ‘who’ he is. The point here is not that the action might be misunderstood; Arendt is aware of the contingency of performance and the agent’s failure to control the outcome of the action (including how it is received). The issue is that both Plato and Aristotle raise issues with democratic fora and how people are constrained to tailor what they say to be seen and heard. Without the tools to address this, it is unclear how ‘free’ disclosure can be if it requires such a context. When Arendt discusses the *polis*, and its characteristic *isonomy* (*Revolution*, p31), she argues that the public realm is where everyone meets as citizens, not as private persons, and she suggests that this fact is enough to secure a space to speak and listen to each other with regard for that equality. Critics of ancient democracy were not so sure (e.g. Plato, *Republic*, 492b-d).

Though there are many points on which Aristotle and Arendt agree: man is a political animal, whose agency is realised in action, which requires a community of others for its proper expression, Arendt’s final verdict is that Aristotle failed to appreciate the value of his own distinctions. She is aware that the move she makes in the passage cited from the *Ethics* (1177b31) is at odds with Aristotle’s final verdict, which privileges contemplation as the activity *par excellence*, as both radically autotelic and capable of realizing our capacity for flourishing better than any other activity, politics included. So, Aristotle is criticized in the final analysis for devaluing human affairs (*Human*, p195, p301), even though he held the tools to appreciate its value. Some of her criticisms are unpersuasive, and not required for her own account.

Though it may be the case that action and speech “attempt to gain advantages beyond political action, advantages such as political power, prestige or at least happiness for the statesman himself and his fellow citizens, and that is something other than political activity” (*N.E.*, 1177b), this is not to say that political activity has only instrumental value for Aristotle. Something can be valued for its own sake and for the sake of further ends, and surely Arendt does not want to deprive her own account of political speech and action of these further opportunities (e.g. to acquire social justice) either. All she needs is the point that political speech and action should not be *reduced* to such instrumental goals; for therein lies the road to the political sphere’s degradation.

Her central concern is with the teleological framework within which Aristotle explores his account of human flourishing.²⁷ This becomes, for Arendt, an inhibitor to human flourishing, or freedom as she would have it, in the following way. For Aristotle, virtuous action is an end because it manifests a certain kind of life, in conformity with man’s natural end (*N.E.*, 1176b). This teleological framework restricts the freedom of action (*Human*, p207) insofar as it gives it determination from a natural, essential, source.²⁸ This conflicts with freedom; for the freedom of acting resides in its capacity to “call something into being which did not exist before and *which was not given*” (*Human*, p247, italics mine). So, Villa (*Arendt and Heidegger*, p46) argues that ultimately, that is, when perceived within this teleological framework, action is a means for Aristotle – to the development of human nature: “the *praxis/poiesis* distinction simply fails to square with the teleological character of Aristotle’s ethics and politics” (*Arendt and Heidegger*, p47). Within this framework, the only thing that deserves to be called self-sufficient is the final end, or goal, and so Arendt must “attempt to think of *praxis* outside the teleological framework”. This is not a fair criticism of Aristotle; *praxis* can be conceived as a way in which character is manifested, not as an instrumental means to that end. What really bothers Arendt, though, is the natural given-ness of this goal when perceived within this teleological framework, which means that the freedom of the *zoon politikon* presents itself as the result of necessity (though this would be hypothetical, not natural, necessity for

²⁷ Compare ‘What is Authority, *Between Past and Future*, p116, where she detaches Aristotle’s insights from his naturalism explicitly.

²⁸ In *The Life of the Mind* (Vol 2, 15) she writes as follows: “The view that everything real must be preceded by a potentiality as one of its causes implicitly denies the future as an authentic tense: the future is nothing but a consequence of the past, and the difference between natural and man-made things is merely between those whose potentialities necessarily grow into actualities and those that may or may not be actualized”.

Aristotle). If Aristotelian activities are tethered to prior potentialities, which are grounded in nature, these reveal only the sameness of our nature as rational agents.

Arendt's attempt to distance herself from Aristotle raises the question of what grounds the value of action on her own account, and if these grounds might also reduce action to a means to a given end. If, for example, the end of politics is to make freedom "a permanent possibility for its citizens", then it is not clear why we should not conceive of politics, on her account too, as an instrumental means to this end.²⁹ Furthermore, freedom itself is "ontologically rooted", as she puts it, in the fact of natality (*Human*, p9). So, the issue cannot be with the given-ness of the goal - "that a beginning be made, man was created" - but rather with its determination. On the first point, Arendt would surely want to say that politics is a way in which freedom is manifest and not an instrumental means to this end. On the second, if freedom is "ontologically rooted" in the fact of our natality, even though this is 'given' to man as such, this does not rule out any course of action, nor does it need to be given any substantive normative content, or specified as any kind of goal, or *telos*. This *does* draw a contrast with Aristotle where the claim that we are essentially rational rules out courses of action that do not accord with this, and rationality *is a telos* in the substantive sense of a goal to be aimed at. So far, then, Aristotle exposes tensions and obscurities in her account, but these need not be insurmountable difficulties to its overall coherence.

3. *Talk in the Polis with Socrates*

Though Aristotle provides conceptual resources to theorize the value of political agency and action, it is an Aristotle freed from essentialism; freedom grounds the value of action, for Arendt, which is rooted in the fact of our natality, and manifested as 'greatness' or 'virtuosity'.³⁰ Once freed from an essentialist, teleological framework, freedom as virtuosity may appear to be an aesthetic notion, with the *polis* designated as its "space of appearance". And yet here, too, Arendt charts a tricky path; the point is not just to make a space for individual appearance and vacuous self-expression; not all performance speaks to the conditions of civic, political life. The kind of performative action characteristic of the *polis* is speech, which is "about some

²⁹ Villa argues that Arendt views the political community as a means to the end of freedom (*Arendt and Heidegger*, p44).

³⁰ *Revolution*, p98: "if . . . we understand the political in the sense of the *polis*, its end or *raison d'être* would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear".

worldly, objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent” (*Human*, p182). This objective reality concerns the worldly interests that “relate and bind” people together. Though Arendt has been criticized for being elusive when it comes to clarifying the kind of speech she has in mind, she is explicit that such speech “varies with each group of people”, so no account of its content can be given.³¹ However in two essays she returns to the Greeks to clarify the salient features of this activity, if not its content. In so doing, the Greek philosophers again provide limiting constraints for her account - and challenges to it.

In ‘The Concept of History’ she writes as follows: “In this incessant talk the Greeks discovered that the world we have in common is usually regarded from an infinite number of different standpoints, to which correspond the most diverse points of view”.³² The deliberative practices of the Greeks showed the importance of exchanging viewpoints with fellow citizens and viewing the world from one another’s standpoint. Arendt sees this “exchange” of viewpoints in Greek tragedy, history, and Sophistic literature. In a lecture ‘Philosophy and Politics’ delivered a few years before the publication of the *Human Condition*, (written in 1954, published in 1990), she hails Socrates as its star practitioner. In this lecture, she employs many of the same distinctions explored in the *Human Condition* and uses Socrates as a model of deliberative action who captures what she calls “the political insight *par excellence*”. Arendt sees much continuity between Aristotle and Socrates, claiming that “great parts of Aristotle’s political philosophy, especially those in which he is in explicit opposition to Plato, go back to Socrates”.³³ The challenge she raises for herself is how far Socrates can illuminate political *praxis* without delivering at least some characteristics of Plato and whether her sharp separation between a historical Socrates and Plato is sustainable, given that the characteristics she praises from Socrates are drawn from *Platonic* dialogues.

Central to Arendt’s reading of Socrates as the last great ‘philosopher citizen’ was his distinctive way of talking with others:

To Socrates, *doxa* was the formulation in speech...of what appears to me. This *doxa* comprehended the world as it opens itself to me. It was not therefore

³¹ See, for example, the criticisms of Pitkin on the “curious emptiness of content characterizing Arendt’s image of the public sphere”, in “Justice: On Relating Private and Public”, *Political Theory* 9 (no. 3) (1981), pp327-352, p337.

³² ‘The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern’, *Between Past and Future*, pp41-91, p51.

³³ “Philosophy and Politics”, p82.

subjective fantasy and arbitrariness, but also not something new and valid for all. The assumption was that the world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it, and that the sameness of the world, its commonness (*koinon*) or ‘objectivity’ resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite the differences between men and their positions in the world– ‘Both you and I are human’.

Arendt refocuses attention on the meaning of *doxa* as not only ‘opinion’, but also (in Homeric mode) ‘splendor’ or ‘fame’.³⁴ As such, she argues, *doxa* is tethered to the public sphere where each person shows ‘who’ he is. Socratic *doxa* becomes the privileged mark of political speech (in contrast to Plato’s downgrading of *doxa* in the *Republic*: 476ff.); for, “the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects”, and it is these Socrates cultivated by eliciting the opinions of others. Arendt appropriates characteristics of Socratic dialectic and re-inscribes them within her political vision. The maieutic aspect of Socratic dialectic becomes a privileged medium for ‘self-disclosure’. Socrates helped citizens to articulate the truthfulness in their opinions, and in that sense assisted their ‘natality’; for ‘each citizen to be articulate enough to show his opinion in its truthfulness and to understand his fellow citizen’. This, she argues, is “the political insight *par excellence*”.³⁵ The communal nature of Socratic discussion becomes a performance within a plural context of deliberation and judgment and is used to capture her key notions of ‘publicity’ and ‘plurality’. And, the critical aspect of the elenchus, that is, adjusting to other’s points of view in the formulation of one’s *doxa* becomes the mode in which we embody plurality. In the activity of adjusting our *doxa* in light of the opinions of others, we learn to appreciate that the world “opens up differently” to different people and acquire an ability to negotiate with those plural perspectives. Finally, the revelation of what is common between the speakers is reconceived as the goal of Socratic discussion; it establishes a common realm “by talking about what is between them”.³⁶

³⁴ Compare Pericles in the Funeral Oration (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.64.5, trans. Warner): “The brilliance of the present is the glory (*doxa*) of the future stored up forever in the memory of man”.

³⁵ “Philosophy and Politics”, p83-4.

³⁶ Compare ‘Truth and Politics’, *Between Past and Future*, pp223-260, p241: “Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent”.

Socratic practice is interpreted through the lens of Aristotelian *praxis* to highlight its value. Since these goals of Socratic speech are found within the communicative activity and not some goal external to them, to which they must conform, thought and action, or *logos* and *bios*, as she puts it, were united. In this way, the “potential character” of [Socratic] action “exists only in its actualization” (*Human*, p200); that is, in the activity of talking together. Socratic action is a mode of action, properly speaking, because it does not fall into this pattern; its value resides in the activity itself: “to have talked something through, to have talked about something, some citizen’s *doxa*, seemed result enough”. In a politics that unites thought and action, ‘plurality and freedom have full play’.

For Arendt, in Socratic dialogue one binds oneself within a communicative web by showing how one’s discursive goals are intertwined with those of others, so dialogue reaches the “We, the true plural of action”. For Arendt’s Socrates, we become fully human agents capable of understanding ourselves, only through communicative activity with others. Even though the *Gorgias*, a text from which she draws much inspiration, is a dialogue in which the *politike techne* turns out to be philosophy, conceived as the rather inward sounding project of ‘care for the soul’ (521d), this is something her Socrates felt the need to ‘publicize’; as he claims in the *Apology*, he does not lead a quiet life (*Apol.* 36b-e, 37e-38a). Care of the soul is a call for civic engagement because the work it requires is essentially plural.³⁷ Socrates’ practice is resonant with ideals of participatory democracy, because the individual cannot ‘know himself’ except by revealing his ‘specific articulateness’ to others. And it is articulation of his specific viewpoint on what is *common to all* that is crucial here. The common good is not just recognizing the articulateness of another if that is the details of one’s inner life; *to koinon* here is outward looking, towards the public realm of common affairs, ‘what is common to the city’, as Socrates puts it in the *Crito* (50a), or towards those worldly interests that “relate and bind” people together, as Arendt puts it (*Human*, p182).³⁸

³⁷ This differs from the politically engaged Socrates of M. Schofield, *Plato: Political Philosophy* (Oxford: 2006). Though Schofield argues that both the *Crito* and the *Apology* “show Socrates as deeply embedded in and engaged with Athens” (p26), he argues that ‘philosophy’s role is to perform for the city the supreme public benefit of moral criticism’ (p24). See also D. Villa, *Philosopher versus the Citizen*, who stresses the critical, dissident, force of the elenchus, and J. Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: 1998) p241 on the “gadfly ethics” of Socrates.

³⁸ Though a concern for the common good appears in many Platonic works, the context does not always make it clear that what is common to the city is the goal; in some works, the idea is that it is a common good for all if the truth were known, where that truth may or may not refer to, what is

Revealing what is common in the public realm is a constitutive goal of a Socratic dialogue for Arendt:

If we wanted to define, traditionally, the one outstanding virtue of the statesman, we could say that it consists in understanding the greatest possible number and variety of realities – not subjective viewpoints – as those realities open themselves up to the various opinions of citizens, and at the same time in being able to communicate between the citizens and their opinions, so that the commonness of this world becomes apparent.³⁹

“This kind of understanding – seeing the world from the other’s point of view – is the political insight *par excellence*”. Self-expression is thus constrained by ‘publicity’ and ‘plurality’ and Socrates facilitates, what Arendt terms in other works, a “common sense”, which relates the appearances of all human beings to one another.⁴⁰ In a passage that sounds strikingly Platonic, she writes that “only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear” (*Human*, p57, p199).

Socratic dialogue is also suited to fostering equality and friendship, further features of political life. Arendt argues that Socratic dialogue “which doesn’t need a conclusion to be meaningful, is most appropriate for and more frequently shared by friends”. She must be drawing on texts like the *Gorgias*, a work in which the relationship between friendship and proper discussion is a theme (487e5-6, 499c,

common to the city. See, for example, *Grg.* 505e4-6 and *Charm.* 166d, where Socrates refers to the *koinon agathon*.

³⁹ “Philosophy and Politics”, p83-4.

⁴⁰ She also calls this a species of “enlarged mentality”, following Kant. See *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, (ed.) Beiner (1982) 10, with M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, p270-1. See also *Between Past and Future*, p220-1: “In the *Critique of Judgment* . . . Kant insisted upon a different way of thinking, for which it would not be enough to be in agreement with one’s own self, but which consisted of being able to “think in the place of everybody else” and which he therefore called an “enlarged mentality” (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*). The power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. From this potential agreement judgment derives its specific validity. This means, on the one hand, that such judgment must liberate itself from the “subjective private conditions,” that is, from the idiosyncrasies which naturally determine the outlook of each individual in his privacy . . . ; it needs the presence of others “in whose place” it must think, whose perspective it must take into consideration, and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all”.

507e3-508a4).⁴¹ Discussion is there contextualized to the *polis* by the appropriation of democratic speech markers, such as speaking with *parrhesia* (roughly ‘frankness’),⁴² and this is something that obtains between ‘friends’.⁴³ Friendship is a precondition of proper disclosure, and a manifestation of equality.

The political element in friendship is that in truthful dialogue each of the friends can understand the truth inherent in the other’s opinion. More than his friend as a person, one friend understands how, and in what specific articulateness the common world appears to the other, who as a person is forever unequal or different. This kind of understanding – seeing the world from the other’s point of view – is the political insight *par excellence*.

People ‘equalize’ themselves through the sharing of opinions and friendship manifests an ability to see the world from another’s point of view.⁴⁴ In truthful dialogue, difference and otherness is ‘equalized’, and community arises through this equalization of difference; ‘the political equalization is friendship’ (“Philosophy and Politics”, p83). Political relations, to be expressive of freedom, are relations without domination, and friendship is the recognition that equals give to one another, who have come to appreciate the other’s unique perspective on their common world. “Socrates seems to have believed that the political function of the philosopher was to help establish this kind of common world, built on the understanding of friendship, in which no ruler-ship is needed”. In this she thinks Aristotle follows Socrates, citing *NE* 1133a14 and 1155a5: “Aristotle concludes that it is friendship and not justice as Plato maintained in the *Republic*, the great dialogue about justice, that appears to be the bond of communities. For Aristotle, friendship is higher than justice because justice is no longer necessary between friends”.⁴⁵

⁴¹ On which, see R. Kamtekar, “The Profession of Friendship: Callicles, Democratic Politics and Rhetorical Education in Plato’s *Gorgias*”, *Ancient Philosophy* 25 (2) (2005) pp319-339.

⁴² See also *Laches* 178a, 179c, 189a; *Grg.* 487a, 487b, 487d, 491e, 492d, 521a; *Phdr.* 240e5-6; *Laws* 806c8, 806d2, 835c4.

⁴³ S. Monoson argues that this suggests a concern on Plato’s part to present the philosopher’s critical and alternative views as enabled by democratic culture. See S. Monoson, “Frank Speech, Democracy and Philosophy”, in eds. P. Euben, J. Wallach and J. Ober, *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (Cornell: 1994), p172.

⁴⁴ Arendt returns to the importance of friendship when discussing Eichmann. She argues that the absence of *philia* and a resulting inability to see the world from another’s point of view is what enabled Eichmann to carry out his atrocities (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1964) p287-8).

⁴⁵ Aristotle associates friendship and equality in the *Politics* 1295b7-8, and with political justice at 1155a24-6. In *NE* 8.1 1155a26-8, he writes: “if people are friends they have no need of justice, but if they are just they need friendship in addition, and the most just sort of justice seems to be friendly

4. *Socratic Challenges*

Arendt's use of Socrates shows that this is *Plato's* Socrates (and not that of Xenophon, or Aristophanes).⁴⁶ Inspiration is drawn from the *Gorgias*, which has become the *locus classicus* for those who want to defend Plato from charges of political indecency of various kinds.⁴⁷ A curious feature of Arendt's reliance on the *Gorgias* is that it has been read as articulating the tension Arendt sees between philosophy and politics, whereas she reads it as something of a resolution. As Dodds (1951: 31) has argued: "it is fairly clear that the *Gorgias* is more than an *apologia* for Socrates; it is at the same time Plato's *apologia pro vita sua*. Behind it stands Plato's decision to forgo the political career towards which both family tradition and his own inclinations (*Ep.* Vii 325e1) had urged him, and instead to open a school of philosophy". Socrates puts the subject of his conversation in the following way: it concerns how we are to live: "Is the best life to which you summon me those 'manly' activities – speaking before the assembly and practicing rhetoric and being a politician in the present mode? Of is this the life of philosophy?" Arendt's reading eclipses this tension, since this tension, or rupture for her, is located in a textual moment beyond the *Gorgias*, in the *Republic*, as we shall see. This tells us something about her understanding of the conflict between philosophy and politics. By effacing this tension from view she indicates that she does not see anything of significance for this conflict here, or to put the point more strongly, that she is persuaded by Socrates (against Callicles) that there is nothing about *Socratic* philosophy that poses problems for a proper conception of the political life. If Socratic speech captures 'natality', 'publicity' and 'plurality', then it is political for Arendt, and Socrates can rightly claim to practice the true *politike technē*. Whatever tension there is between philosophy and politics will not be an irreconcilable one; it is due to a specific – Platonic- moment in philosophy's conception.

Arendt's use of Socrates – as a model of "the sharing of words and deeds" -

(*philikon*)". Friendship was an element of Athenian civic life before and after Socrates (e.g. Sophocles' *Antigone* 355).

⁴⁶ As she notes in *The Life of the Mind*, Chapter III: 18, "The *Gorgias* does not belong to the early Socratic dialogues", though she argues it contains authentically Socratic elements. She takes inspiration from the "inspired profile by the Classicist and philosopher Gregory Vlastos, "The Paradox of Socrates"', *Life of the Mind*, Chapter III: 17.

⁴⁷ See, for example, S. Monoson, "Frank Speech, Democracy, and Philosophy" and P. Euben, "Democracy and Political Theory: A Reading of Plato's *Gorgias*", both in (ed.) Euben, Wallach and Ober, *Athenian Political Thought: A Reading of Plato's Gorgias*, though such "revisionist accounts of Socrates as a democrat" have been criticized by S. Barber, "Theory and Practice: Democracy and Philosophers", *History Today*, vol. 44, issue 8 (1994).

emphasizes her concern to interweave the performative with the deliberative in her account of political *praxis*. This can be seen in her play on the etymology of *doxa*, where Arendt fuses together the Homeric and the civic/deliberative; *doxa* is not just an individualistic achievement of splendor, but a way of showing one's splendor and distinctness *in speech* –with others. In this way, *kleos/doxa* is aesthetic insofar as it is linked to appearance *and* deliberative insofar as showing who one is requires the presence of innumerable perspectives with which one engages and in so doing from whom one becomes a distinct voice. Socrates highlights a mode of discursive action that is participatory, public, and political; for political talk is about the world, what is common between men.

The importance of this deliberative aspect requires careful unpacking given Arendt's remarks about *praxis*, though; this cannot be understood as dialogue aimed at understanding, or agreement, which would import norms of rationality to regulate, and goals to dominate, this realm.⁴⁸ The intrinsic value of political activity must be preserved, which serves no higher end: As Arendt argues in her Kant lectures:

“Whatever *political* quality Socratic dialogue has follows from the fact that Socrates “performed in the marketplace the way the flute-player performed at a banquet. It [Socratic dialogue] is sheer performance, sheer activity”.⁴⁹

Leaving aside the issue of whether one can appreciate the value of Socratic activity as “sheer performance”, this reading exposes puzzles. First, is not “talking together”... “*so that the commonness of this world becomes apparent*” (italics mine) an external standard, which functions in much the same way as ‘truth’, namely as something by which one measures the value of the talking? If talking together - and in the specific way imagined, so that a common world becomes established - does not function in this way, then why not just talk to oneself? It will not be enough to say that this is a standard of the plural political community and so is not something imposed on it from without, because this might be said of many of the arts and crafts that determine their own standards. The point, I take it, is not just one about whether there is a standard, or measure, by which one judges the value of the activity, but about where the value is located. If the standard is one that reaches beyond the plural community (as it does not in her case) then the activities within that community will

⁴⁸ On which see Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, p77 who argues that “the radicalism of the project consists in her questioning *all* conceptions of action that submit it to the rule of a *telos*”. He criticises Jürgen Habermas’ “ideal speech situation” here, for which see Habermas, “Hannah Arendt,” *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, p184.

⁴⁹ See *Kant Lectures*, p. 37; *Life of the Mind* Chapter III: 14.

be somehow eclipsed; if it resides within the community of speakers, as in the case of “talking together”, then this value is one that can be realized *politically*, that is, within a plural community of equals. And that must be the point: to identify the ways in which certain activities, engaged in by the Greeks of her Aristotelian *polis*, and practiced by Socrates, captured the way that talking together was valuable for its own sake, as a manifestation of our capacity for flourishing, or freedom.

A further issue is that nothing yet rules out the (possibly Platonic) possibility that such activity (as practiced by Socrates, at any rate) is valuable insofar as it manifests a capacity for rationality, the proper way to care for the soul. This might lead (for Plato, at any rate) to values outside of the community – to the forms, or the divine and one might think that rationality as a value, imposes restrictive norms that inhibit the freedom of action.⁵⁰ But can Arendt reject such norms and still highlight the features of Socratic conversation she prizes? For example, how – in Arendtian terms – can one reveal distinct perspectives without some notion of truth? If one thinks that two claims cannot both be true, leaving aside the issue of which, if either, is in fact true, then one can be assured that one has two distinct perspectives. To realize that someone disagrees with you, that they have a distinct perspective on the world, you need to see that your claim and theirs cannot both be true. If I say that the table is stone and you say it is wood, we can see that these are distinct perspectives because they cannot both be true. So, it may seem as if experiencing someone else’s point of view as such requires some notion of truth.⁵¹ Though Arendt is right that the issue of what makes the claims in fact true is a separate issue, we surely cannot dispense with some notion of truth, or regulative norms of logic, if we are to stake a claim to distinctness. The point here is not just that without this the character from whom she draws so much inspiration in ‘Philosophy and Politics’ would be unrecognizable, but that there is a danger that he would be transformed into serving the kind of vacuous self-expression from which she tried to distance herself and the opportunity for distinctness would be lost. The use of Socrates to navigate between the aesthetic and the deliberative, and preserve a purified Aristotelian *praxis*, seems doomed to failure.

This is too hasty. The view is not that truth has no role in political talk. Arendt is very much concerned with factual truth about the past in some of her writings (e.g.

⁵⁰ Villa’s concern in *Arendt and Heidegger*, p77.

⁵¹ On the importance of some notion of truth in politics, see B. Williams, “Truth, Politics and Self-Deception”, *Social Research* (1996) vol. 63 (3), pp603-617.

Origins).⁵² As she writes in *Between Past and Future*, p238: “factual truth informs political thought, just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation”.

Highlighting the value of *doxa* is motivated by an attempt to assert the value of a plurality of opinions against a tyranny of truth.⁵³ The point is not that truth is irrelevant, but that it is not the goal towards which political discussion should tend, the value of which resides in the activity of sharing opinions on “the reality of experience” and what seems to be true.

The final problem is more pressing, however. If the value Arendt emphasizes with Socratic discussion is that each participant manifests the capacity for freedom, then how can we dispense with a robust normative framework to enable this activity? If the kind of speech she urges must capture ‘natality’, ‘publicity’ and ‘plurality’, then it requires participation of a very distinctive kind. Her use of Socrates suggests that dialogue is required because only when one’s discursive goals are intertwined with others, can speech embody ‘plurality’ and reach the “We, the true plural of action”, and this is dialogue of a very specific kind. *Maieusis* is required because the speech needs to attend to the specific articulateness of the other to secure the other’s ‘natality’. One must also acquire an ability to negotiate with the plural perspectives of others, by seeing how they cohere with one’s own views, and be open and willing to adjust one’s position in relation to the views of another, to develop an ‘enlarged mentality’. If all of this is required to capture ‘natality’, ‘publicity’ and ‘plurality’, and in so doing qualify as proper *political* speech, then, one would like to know how to ensure equal speech amongst plural agents, how to foster appreciative connections between participants, and how to provide the spaces in which plural agents can ‘give an account’ of their political preferences? Though one can appreciate the desire to free action from any restrictive normative framework, without norms of proper discursive engagement it is unclear how this is supposed to work. Her use of Socrates exposes a tension between the egalitarianism of natality and what is required for its delivery.

In the final analysis, Arendt distanced herself from the Socrates whose use prompts such questions. Later reflections on Socrates in ‘Thinking and Moral

⁵² See, for example, *Origins*, p474: “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi, or the convinced communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e. the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e. standards of thought) no longer exist”.

⁵³ See ‘Truth and Politics’, *Between Past and Future*, p241: “The trouble is that factual truth precludes debate which constitutes the very essence of political life...seen from the political perspective this is necessarily domineering; it doesn’t take into account other people’s opinions and taking these into account is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking”.

Considerations' suggest that the kind of dialogue in which Socrates engaged will never be plural enough to capture the 'we' of political life.⁵⁴ Though he helped citizens make their *doxa* explicit and negotiated with the plural perspectives of others, this will never reach the plural of politics. She is surely right about this; for what Socrates or, rather, Plato's Socrates, - let us be clear about this - saw, was that a kind of self-disclosure that Arendt privileges: making one's appearance explicitly in speech, 'giving an account of oneself', requires a certain kind of intimacy that just cannot be had on the public stage. That is one reason why love and friendship play such an important role in Socratic dialogue – conceived by Arendt as private, social emotions, thereby excluded from her political arsenal. It is also why Plato developed no art of speech in the politically charged, public, rhetorical world of the *Gorgias*, and did provide such an account in the more intimate setting of the *Phaedrus*, set outside of the city walls, in discussion with a friend. As Plato saw in the participatory democracy of his own time, too much 'plurality' and 'publicity' risks shaping that enterprise in accordance with the goals of others, to be heard and acknowledged by them. So, although she was right to distance herself from Socrates on this point, how can her own account negotiate between her privileged ideals of 'natality', 'publicity' and 'plurality'?

Though Arendt came to be sceptical about the civically engaged Socrates of 'Philosophy and Politics', even when he shuns the crowd in favor of small group discussion this does not imply that he has no sense of the public realm. Shame was a characteristic result of Socratic dialogue and, as Bernard Williams has argued, shame "requires an internalized other...who embodies intimations of a genuine social reality – in particular of how it will be *for one's life with others* if one acts in one way rather than another" (italics mine).⁵⁵ 'The other', for Plato's Socrates, is quite often a *radical* other, the kind of person Plato – not Aristotle, who talks to the converted -, gave voice to in his richly multi-vocal dialogues (e.g. Calicles in the *Gorgias* and Thrasymachus in the *Republic*). Calicles is described as a 'touchstone' for Socrates immediately after his criticism of Socrates' *entire way of life* (*Gorgias* 484c-486d). As Long argues: "in showing how fundamentally his opinions differ from Socrates' opinions, Calicles shows how well-qualified he is to put Socrates' opinions to the test and, should he be brought to agreement, to confirm Socrates' opinions".⁵⁶ These radical

⁵⁴ In 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' in *Life of the Mind*. For a tension between the portraits of Socrates, see D. Villa, 'Philosopher versus the Citizen', *Political Theory* 26 (2) pp147-172 (1998).

⁵⁵ B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (University of California Press: 1993), p102.

⁵⁶ A. Long, *Conversation and Self-Sufficiency in Plato* (Cambridge University Press: 2013), p43.

others might provide the rudiments of a ‘plural’ consciousness, and if their deliberation is turned towards their common world, then, perhaps, a political consciousness.

This, again, emphasizes the need to ensure equal speech amongst plural agents. How is the kind of Calliclean self-display that seems incapable of friendship and community prevented, whose pitfalls are dramatically exemplified in her favored text, the *Gorgias*? Arendt is clearly concerned to integrate the ‘urge to self-display’ within a communal context.⁵⁷ Consider her account of one of the key political virtues:

The old virtue of moderation, of keeping within bounds, is indeed one of the political virtues *par excellence*, just as the political temptation *par excellence* is *hubris* (*Human*, p191).

This is the virtue highlighted by Socrates in the *Gorgias* as a requirement for friendship and community. Without *sophrosune* we are left with Calliclean self-display, effected by pleonectic agents who outreach themselves in discussion (495a, 499c). Without moderation one cannot be a partner, and where there is no partnership there is no friendship, community, or dialogue (507-8). Publicity and self-disclosure without friendship and equality are at risk of tyrannical abuse and Calliclean *pleonexia*. Here Arendt’s concerns are dangerously close to Plato’s. It is the confrontation of just these sorts of difficulties that prepares the way for the *Republic*, with its call to cultivate a moderate soul and city to provide the conditions for political life. All the more reason, perhaps, why her own call for “keeping within bounds” must be so sharply distinguished from the anti-hero of her story.

5. *Plato’s Mistakes: Man in his Singularity and Politics as Craft*

Features of Aristotle’s philosophy and Socrates’ practice enable Arendt to clarify the value of political agency and action over other human activities that characterize the active life. Understood as radically autotelic, *praxis* is the proper object of political philosophy, and public spaces (such as those in the *polis*) need to be secured for its operation, because it is in *praxis* that we realize who we are as free and distinct agents

⁵⁷ On the ‘agonal spirit’ and ‘reckless individualism’ that ‘eventually brought the *polis* to its doom’, see “Philosophy and Politics”, cited in M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, pp137-8. On a tension in her work between the agonal and individualistic view of politics and the call for co-operative participation in public affairs, see B. Parek, *Hannah Arendt*, p177 and G. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*, p7, p43.

who live in a plural world. This insight was lost with Plato, Arendt argues, whose *Republic* inaugurated a reversal of this order, and has since become authoritative for the entire Western tradition of political thought (*Human*, p225). How so?

The precise historical moment for this move is the trial and death of Socrates and the precise textual moment is the famous image of the Cave in the *Republic*, on which Arendt writes as follows:

Whoever reads the Cave allegory in Plato's *Republic* in the light of Greek history will soon be aware that the *periagoge*, the turning about that Plato demands of the philosopher, actually amounts to a reversal of the Homeric world order....The senseless, ghostlike, motion ascribed by Homer to the lifeless existence of the soul after death in Hades is now ascribed to the senseless doings of men who do not leave the cave of human existence to behold the eternal ideas visible in the sky (*Human*, p292).⁵⁸

The turning around is a rejection of 'the senseless doings of men' in their plurality, in favor of the solitary reflection of the philosopher; this is a turn to considering man 'in the singular', in his solitary contemplation. Since the authentically political is being in common, considering "men, not man, in the plural", Plato, in effect, divorced philosophy from politics. There were three specific consequences of this shift in values, for Arendt. It turned politics into a form of craft and thereby separated those who know and do not act from those who do and do not know; it introduced instrumental thinking into politics, and deprived the political of any inherent value. Furthermore, the isolationist tendencies of the philosopher led to a dangerously tyrannical mode of reflection.⁵⁹ All of these are attributed to a desire to escape from the human condition, which must acknowledge the fact that we are mortal, that we live on the earth, and inhabit a plural world:

⁵⁸ See also 'Philosophy and Politics', p96 where she writes that: "It belongs to the puzzling aspects of the cave that Plato depicts its inhabitants as frozen, chained before a screen, without any possibility of doing anything or communicating with one another. Indeed, the two politically most significant words designating human activity, talk and action (*lexis* and *praxis*) are conspicuously absent from the whole story". See also *Between Past and Future*, p117, where she argues that the key moment "was made when, in the *Republic*'s allegory of the cave, Plato described the sphere of human affairs – all that belongs to the living together of men in a common world – in terms of darkness, confusion and deception, which those aspiring to true being must turn away from and abandon if they want to discover the clear sky of eternal ideas".

⁵⁹ She returns time and again to the dangers of these tendencies, arguing that contemplation leads to 'world alienation' (*Origins*, p192-4), and that 'world-lessness is always a form of barbarism'.

Escape from the frailty of human affairs into the solidity of quiet and order has in fact so much to recommend it that the greater part of political philosophy since Plato could easily be interpreted as various attempts to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics altogether. The hallmark of all such escapes is the concept of rule, that is, the notion that men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey (*Human*, p222).⁶⁰

As a direct result of the flight identified in the *Republic*, Arendt argues that the ‘political’ is reduced to a realm concerned with necessity, and work; it is confined to instrumentality in its desire to enable the singular philosopher to live undisturbed by it.⁶¹ If value is found outside the *polis*, in the contemplative realm, the *polis* becomes concerned with necessity and commercialism. This leads to a triumph of laborer’s values, where everything is about satisfying human needs. This is an odd criticism of Plato, for the sphere of the political in the *Republic* is hardly determined by the concerns of workers and auxiliaries,⁶² if we allow ourselves to set those up as analogues to Arendt’s categories of ‘labor’ and ‘work’, with which they share much in common. Plato was as alive as Arendt to dangers of the instrumental reasoning employed by banausic types, those who ‘can’t rule the beasts within him, but can only serve them’ these stand as an analogue to her consumerists who cannot think beyond the satisfaction of their bodily necessities.⁶³ Though Arendt does not argue that banausic types should be ‘the slave of that best person who has a divine ruler within himself’ (590c-d), she does deny them the freedom required to be a distinctively human agent; since agency, properly speaking, is for her *political* agency, they will

⁶⁰ This strand of thought has become influential. Compare Barber, who writes that: “when reason claims to speak, politics is silent; where men profess to agree upon what is true, there is no need to devise methods to live and act together in the face of uncertainty and conflict; where right is purportedly given, common justice need not be invented”. B. Barber, *The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times* (Princeton University Press: 1989), p210.

⁶¹ Her view that the philosopher rules for the safety of the philosopher and out of fear of hostility from the many is an implausible reading (‘What is Authority?’, *Between Past and Future*, p107, p112). The philosopher is happier in contemplation and returns to pay a debt of justice to those in the city whose activities have contributed to his happiness (520a-d). She may well have bemoaned the fact that this is a necessity for the philosopher, characterised as a form of compulsion (on which, see 500d, 519c, e; 520a, e; 521b; 539e; 540a). Though this is clearly not biological necessity, insofar as ruling is compelled, it can serve no part of the philosopher’s freedom, for Arendt, and so this political act is deprived of that value.

⁶² The aim is a virtuous citizen body united in consensus, friendship, and happiness (420b-421c, 432a).

⁶³ She has much to say about the Greek term ‘*banausos*’ which she associates with a utilitarian mentality and an inability to think or judge apart from utility/function. See ‘The Crisis in Culture’; *Between Past and Future*, p215.

not even be agents at all. Since freedom is open only to those capable of thinking beyond the demands of biological necessity, it is unclear what objections Arendt would bring to Plato on this point. Indeed, she refers to the “shadowy existence” of those who live without affirming their identity in the public sphere, those who are inactive in the public realm, a category in which she includes not just the slave, foreigner and barbarian in antiquity, “the laborer and craftsman prior to the modern age, but also the job-holder and businessman in our world” (*Human*, p180). Arendt and Plato are here in much agreement about the lack of ‘flourishing’ as Plato would call it, and ‘freedom’ as Arendt would call it, possible for workers and producers. Perhaps that is why there is not a word of objection about the division of classes in the *Republic*.⁶⁴

The Platonic mistake highlighted is that politics is conceived as craft, or ‘fabrication’ (*Human*, p225-6), something captured in Plato’s notion of a political *techne*.⁶⁵

To them [Plato and Aristotle] legislation and the execution of decisions by vote are the most legitimate political activities because in them ‘men act like craftsmen’; the result of their action is a tangible product, and its process has a clearly recognizable end. There is no longer, or rather, not yet action (*praxis*) properly speaking, but making (*poiesis*), which they prefer because of its greater reliability. It is as though they had said that if men only renounce their capacity for action...there could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs (*Human*, p27, p195).

If there is an element in the city with privileged knowledge, which acts as a ‘craftsman’ of justice, this leads to a separation of thought and action; politics is treated as the application of general rules, and the political *techne* is separated from political action, which is reduced to carrying out an externally imposed plan. The preoccupation with rule fails to appreciate how freedom is actualized by participating

⁶⁴ For an explicit statement to this effect, see *Revolution*, p275, p279, where Arendt writes that the political way of life “has never been and will never be the way of life of the many.” For discussion of Arendt’s elitism, see Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, p26, p35.

⁶⁵ For the passage in Plato which best expresses the notion of politics as craft, see *Republic* 540a: “When they have beheld the good itself they shall use it as a model for the right ordering of the state and the citizens themselves” with 500d where the philosopher is a craftsman of justice. The Platonic conception of ruler-ship, she argues, “became authoritative for the whole tradition of political thought, even after the roots of experience from which Plato derived his concepts had long been forgotten” (*Human*, p225).

in public life; on this model, we lose the free disclosure of the human agent. This amounts to the elimination of political action by philosophy, which is left with only instrumental value. Ruling destroys ‘natality’ because we are deprived of a ‘beginning’, since politics is about ruling and being ruled; it destroys ‘plurality’ in favor of the contemplative isolation of the ruling elite.⁶⁶ A further problem is that the instrumental reasoning she insists this involves leads to the idea that the means justifies the end, and that violence, for example, is justified for a good cause (*Human*, p228-9). This is related to the thought that the value of political action itself is eclipsed, because value becomes associated with some end, located outside of the activity itself.

This needs careful unpacking. Arendt does not appear to be denying craft any role in politics; as Canovan has argued: “The only aspect of politics where Arendt did think that craft was called for was in setting up the framework for political action: drawing up a constitution to ...construct an arena for free politics”.⁶⁷ Since much of Plato’s *Republic* seems concerned with outlining, at the very least, a framework for a constitution, an arena for psychic and political life, one might think the *Republic* is just doing something different; her focus on this work, though, has much to do with its role in German philosophy at this time (post-Heidegger).⁶⁸ Some of her points about politics as craft might still hold, however, most notably, perhaps, that Plato destroys the conditions for ‘natality’ and ‘plurality’; so let us explore their basis. One point at issue in relation to her liberal use of the Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* is, I take it, just one about means and ends, and where the value is located on either model. This requires careful formulation lest it slip into absurdity. Arendt cannot be denying the value of any action that involves planning or forethought;⁶⁹ humans do not act like spontaneous animals, and her politics is not anarchic. The point is more specific: whilst free action is not unrelated to motives and

⁶⁶ Arendt argues that Plato transformed the concept of *arche* into a principle of ruling. The Greeks distinguished between two modes of action with the words *archein* and *prattein* – beginning and achieving, she argues, and Plato tried to master action from beginning to end according to the model of fabrication: those who know and rule versus those who do and follow commands. The result is that to begin (*archein*) and to act (*prattein*) become two altogether different activities; the beginner has become a ruler who does not have to act, but to rule, and action is reduced to carrying out orders.

⁶⁷ M. Canovan, “Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm”, *History of Political Thought* (1985) vol. 6 (3), pp617-642. See *Human*, p27 on *poiesis* as legitimate for the lawgiver but not the political actor.

⁶⁸ Law-making (for Arendt) was not a political act for the Greeks of the pre-philosophical *polis*; the law-maker was like the ‘builder of the city walls’ who had to do and to finish his job before political activity proper could begin (*Human*, p27, p194).

⁶⁹ See J. Knauer, “Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt’s concept of Political Action”, *American Political Science Review* 74/3 (1980) pp721-33, p723.

goals, it is not *determined* by them (as in a case of ‘fabrication’) and must always have the possibility of transcending them. This is not to deny that human activity, even of a political kind, is purposive, just that the meaning and value of the action is not derived from the goal.⁷⁰ But one might still find her conception of craft too crude. Though *techne* seems applicable to any activity that reliably attains to an end, there may be many ways to act for the sake of that end. To act for the sake of an end, need not imply that the means is an instrument to the attainment of that further end and so deprive the action itself of all value. One can act for the sake of an end where the action is a constitutive component of the end. Going to a concert is a way in which we enjoy music, something constitutive of the end in question, and not an instrumental means to it. One question, then, is whether politics conceived as craft, necessarily implicates itself in the idea that it is an *instrumental* means to the attainment of some standard, or whether it is a way in which a certain end is realized.⁷¹

Arendt might object that though conceived in this way one can meet the objection that political activity itself is deprived of all value, its value is still judged by conformity to the goal, or standard, and is in this way determined by it. The point here is specific. In *Between Past and Future*, she talks of ‘principles’ manifest in the performing act, and mentions examples such as “honor, or glory, or love of equality”.⁷² These are distinguished from motives or goals because “they are too general to prescribe particular goals” rather, “they inspire”, so the agent retains freedom in the manifestation of the action.⁷³ If action, by contrast, is guided by a future aim whose desirability the intellect has grasped before the agent wills it, then this is reduced to being a matter of right or wrong judgment, which then commands execution. Action, insofar as it is free, is not under guidance of intellect or dictate of will although it needs both for its execution. One might wonder, then, how she would consider the nature of Plato’s principles in this context, the Forms. The Form of the Good operates at such a high level of generality and abstraction that it is far from clear how to apply it to the public sphere. If, as some argue, it is something like an

⁷⁰ As she puts it elsewhere: “the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end which outlasts the activity”, ‘What is Freedom’, *Between Past and Future*, p153.

⁷¹ Arguably, for Plato, the political community is a manifestation of the just order captured in contemplative activity (*Rep.* 500d), a way in which we can embody that end, and not an instrumental means to it. The ideal city is a manifestation of justice (*Rep.* 427e8).

⁷² p152, with Knauer, ‘Motive’, p725.

⁷³ *Between Past and Future*, p152. In ‘What is Freedom’, *Between Past and Future*, p151, she writes: “Action to be free must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other. This is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act, but they are its determining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them”.

ideal of proportionality,⁷⁴ something which, incidentally, presupposes plurality and not simplicity and singularity, though it is some kind of standard, it is not a standard whose application, or ‘manifestation’, to use Arendtian language, directly follows from its apprehension (the philosopher kings require fifteen years of experience and deliberation before they are fit to think about its application in the public sphere: 539d-e), nor is it a standard that imposes precise laws for specific actions (which is why there is no specific legislative activity in the *Republic*, as there is in the *Laws*, where, by contrast, Forms play no explicit role). So, if in Arendt’s political world you can have a unique manifestation of a principle, why not a unique manifestation of a Platonic idea?⁷⁵

Arendt is operating with a very specific conception of Plato’s ideas, drawn, in part, from Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, where the form of Beauty, rather than the Good is highlighted. Arendt sees this as significant:

The Platonic wish to substitute making for acting in order to bestow upon the realm of human affairs the solidity inherent in work and fabrication becomes most apparent where it touches the very centre of his philosophy, the doctrine of ideas. When Plato was not concerned with political philosophy (as in the *Symposium* and elsewhere), he describes the ideas as what “shines most forth” (*ekphanestaton*) and therefore as variations of the beautiful. Only in the *Republic* were the ideas transformed into standards, measurements, and rules of behaviour, all of which are variations or derivations of the idea of the “good” in the Greek sense of the word, that is, of the “good for” or “fitness.” This transformation was necessary to apply the doctrine of ideas to politics, and it is essentially for a political purpose, the purpose of eliminating the character of frailty from human affairs, that Plato found it necessary to declare the good, and not the beautiful, to be the highest idea” (*Human*, p225–26).⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Sedley, D., “Philosophy, the Forms and the Art of Ruling”, in ed. Ferrari, G., *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic* (2007).

⁷⁵ Though perhaps Sharples supports Arendt’s argument. He argues that Plato does allow for debate in the *Republic*, but not in any way that might lead to new and important insights; for if the rulers have achieved complete understanding then this possibility is logically excluded; though it may be that we can have new insights, they won’t be such as to challenge the authority of the philosopher rulers or to make significant changes in the state. B. Sharples, “Plato on Democracy and Expertise”, *Greece and Rome* (1994) 41 (1), p54 n.10.

⁷⁶ This is inspired by Heidegger. In a letter to Jaspers Arendt writes that “Heidegger is right when he says that in the presentation of the cave simile truth is transformed on the sky into correctness consequently ideas into standards”, *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers: Correspondence, 1926-1969*, English translation by Harcourt Brace and Company (1992) p288.

The thought, which becomes more explicit in other works, is that: “the original function of the ideas was not to rule or otherwise determine the chaos of human affairs, but in ‘shining brightness’ to illuminate their darkness. As such, the ideas have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with politics, political experience and the problem of action, but pertain exclusively to philosophy, the experience of contemplation, and the quest for the true being of things. It is precisely ruling, measuring, subsuming, and relegating that are entirely alien to the experiences underlying the doctrine of ideas in its original conception”.⁷⁷ Arendt believes, then, that the role Plato wants to give to the forms in the *Republic* requires him to re-conceive their nature so that they can serve a restrictive, rather than an enabling, function in political life. Just like in a craft, forms become measures, or standards of correctness. In the *Human Condition*, p226, she writes as follows:

It is only when he returns to the dark cave of human affairs to live once more with his fellow men that he needs the ideas as guidance, as standards and rules by which to measure, and under which to subsume, the varied multitude of human deeds and words with the same absolute, objective certainty with which the craftsman can be guided in making and the layman in judging individual beds by using the unwavering ever-present model, the idea of bed in general.

In the image of the Cave, she argues, Plato betrayed his own original conception of the ideas by transforming them into ‘standards’.

Once this move is made, Arendt argues, the craftsman can only “imitate” but not “create”, so that ultimately even *homo faber* is made impotent. The proper attitude towards such models “is to leave them as they are and appear to the inner eye of the mind. If man only renounces his capacity [to] for work and does not do anything, he can behold them and thus participate in their eternity” (*Human*, p303). The specific

⁷⁷ In ‘What is Authority’, *Between Past and Future*, p112-3 Arendt argues that this explains the prominence of the Good, as opposed to the Beautiful in the *Republic*; the latter is what is *ekphanestaton*, but the former is determined by the notion of ‘good for’ or ‘fitness’ (*Human*, p225-6). The analogy between the form of the Good and the Sun puts strain on her reading, however. See also *Human*, p226, note 65: “The word *ekphanestaton* occurs in the *Phaedrus* (250) as the chief quality of the beautiful. In the *Republic* (518) a similar quality is claimed for the idea of the good, which is called *phanotaton*. Both words derive from *phainesthai* (‘to appear’ and ‘shine forth’), and in both cases the superlative is used.” Her response to this similarity is to add: “Obviously, the quality of shining brightness applies to the beautiful much more than to the good”.

reversal to which she refers here is one from *homo faber* into man letting his arms drop in speechless wonder. By this move, even contemplation ultimately “lost its position in the *vita activa* itself” (*Human*, p304). The point, then, is not just that Plato’s standard for politics is a goal outside of the action, which may well be manifested in the political sphere (and so escape a crude instrumentality in its operation); the issue is, she believes, that it denies the agent freedom in its manifestation, and so even *homo faber* is made impotent. This is for two reasons: both because she believes that Plato’s models (forms) are ‘spoiled’ in their materialization, and because the form of the Good as a standard or principle for politics does not submit to the judgment of the plural political community, though its political manifestations might well do.⁷⁸ How important *that* point is for politics on the ground for Plato, though, is not easy to determine, especially given the absence of any such standards in the legislative exercise of the *Laws*. It is clearly crucial for Arendt, though, to distance herself from the thought that there is a principle arrived at from outside of the sphere of political action, and from which it supposedly derives its value. For if there are external sources of value, however abstractly conceived, and however they might be manifested, they will have authority, though this need not be coercive, of course,⁷⁹ and Arendt wants no such apolitical foundations.⁸⁰

Arendt’s Plato is inherited as much from Augustine as Heidegger, so the otherworldly metaphysician and singular contemplative philosopher are to the fore. This allows her to clarify those modes of thinking she saw as inherently hostile to politics. Though her reading focuses on the *Republic*, because this was the central text in the tradition she challenges, she was a careful reader of Plato’s dialogues well beyond that, and quotes liberally from the *Statesman* and the *Laws* in other works.⁸¹ In these other works, she saw the same separation between knowing what to do,

⁷⁸ Note the importance of dialectic: the philosopher must ‘give an account’ and defend his view ‘as if in a battle’, which is clearly an interpersonal (so ‘plural’) enterprise, though one that operates within the restricted sphere of the deliberative elite (as, arguably, all truly free political action does for Arendt too).

⁷⁹ As she suggests elsewhere: “The trouble is that factual truth, precludes debate which constitutes the very essence of political life... seen from the political perspective, *this is necessarily domineering*; it doesn’t take into account other people’s opinions and taking these into account is the hallmark of all strictly political thinking” (‘Truth and Politics’, *Between Past and Future*, p241).

⁸⁰ See ‘What is Authority’, *Between Past and Future*, p141: “To live in a political realm with neither authority not the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living together”. See also p97, p115, and p141 on the importance of not being “subjected to the domination of something outside their realm”.

⁸¹ See ‘The Concept of History’, in *Between Past and Future*, p63, ‘What is Authority’, *Between Past and Future*, p108.

which is the work of the statesman, and actual doing, and a refocusing of political philosophy on the former, which resulted in a failure to appreciate *praxis* as the proper object of political philosophy. This inaugurated a new hierarchy of values, which gave all value to the knowing, in separation from the doing. She is well aware, of course, that neither Plato nor Aristotle conceived of contemplation as *inactive*.⁸² It was an end in itself, with no product beyond the doing, and in this sense, radically autotelic. Contemplation was also freed from the kind of necessity she associated with labor, and external products associated with work, both of which were used as criteria to rehabilitate action. Indeed, if we use the principles on which much of her criticism relies, then contemplation satisfies ‘natality’ (Plato’s liberal use of birthing metaphors might bolster this thought); it might even satisfy ‘publicity’ to some extent insofar as the philosopher must go through *elenchi*, as in a battle, to *show* that he understands the nature of the principle in question. But contemplation does not speak to the condition of our plurality, and since plurality is the condition of our political life, this means that however active, however manifest, however much freedom a Platonic agent might retain in his manifestation of the principle in his own character and life, his activity can never embrace the ‘we’ of political life. Arendt is surely right about this much. Whether her account of “freedom as virtuosity” can embrace plurality any better than Plato’s is an open question at this point.

6. *Arendt’s Philosophical Politics: Tensions in the Dialogue with the Greeks*

As regards the relation of freedom to politics, there is the additional reason that only ancient political communities were founded for the express purpose of serving the free – those who were neither slaves, subject to coercion from others, nor laborers driven and urged on by the necessities of life. If, then, we understand the political in the sense of the polis, its end ... would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear. ‘What is Freedom’, *Between Past and Future*, p154.

Exploring the ways in which Arendt uses Greek philosophers emphasizes certain features of her thought and tensions within it. Aristotle and Socrates provide limiting

⁸² Since she quotes Cato as saying: “Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself” (*Human*, p325), the point cannot be that contemplation is not *active*; for the Aristotle on whom she draws so liberally, it was *praxis par excellence*, whose unproductive nature indicates that its value resides in itself.

constraints on what some have seen as the aesthetic and Romantic aspects of Arendt's thought, those elements which urge self-disclosure, characterize the *polis* as 'the space of appearance' and emphasize creativity in action.⁸³ The self-realization she sees as a key component of human freedom is Aristotelian, so essentially civic (though freed from its naturalism), and the "sharing of words and deeds" is deliberative and plural, in a way that constrains the competitive urge to self-display. But Arendt's use of these philosophers highlights the difficulty of combining the egalitarianism of natality and self-disclosure with the more elitist strands of her thinking. Though Arendt sometimes talks about "equally unique beings" (*Human*, p193) when she is emphasizing the human condition of 'natality', to the extent that it is only those engaged in the life of action in the *polis*, free from biological and productive necessity, that can express that in the proper way, she is operating with a more restricted notion of *civic* equality. The negative conception of liberty as freedom from external rule ('no ruler-ship is needed') is defended in terms of a positive conception of self-realization, through self-disclosure, characterized (with Socrates and Aristotle), as a kind of common deliberation in which one reveals one's 'specific articulateness' and shows how the common world appears to oneself. The kind of equality required for *that kind* of mutual recognition will inevitably be a more exclusive category. As she writes in a passage that would not seem out of place in Plato's *Republic*, those not active in the public realm live "in a shadowy way" without affirming their identity, and these include "the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity...and the laborer and the craftsman prior to the modern age, the job-holder or businessman in our world" (*Human*, p180, p199). In *On Revolution* p280, she writes in a way that is also not at odds with Plato's conception of appetitive types when she relates "the many" to necessity, with their ideals of "abundance and endless consumption".⁸⁴ She argues that the "political life has never been and never will be the life of the many" (*Revolution*, p279), though on her account of the revolutionary councils the elite select themselves, so that the joys of public happiness become "the share of those few from all walks of life who have a share of public freedom". Though Plato may lack this principle of self-selection, at least on his account there is

⁸³ See Taminaux, "Athens and Rome", p168 on her desire to constrain these elements.

⁸⁴ See *Revolution*, p280: "The fact that political elites have always determined the political destinies of the many and have, in most instances, exerted a domination over them, indicates the bitter need of the few to protect themselves against the many, or rather to protect the island of freedom they have come to inhabit against the surrounding sea of necessity". See also p135: "abundance and endless consumption are the ideals of the poor; they are the mirage in the desert of misery".

a sense that those excluded enjoy more than the negative liberty Arendt offers to those outside this elite: “freedom from politics” (*Revolution*, p284). Plato’s select few care “for more than private happiness” (*Revolution*, p284 with *Rep.* 519e–520a). If a foundational value for Arendt is the fact of plurality, that “men, not man live on the earth and inhabit the world” it remains hard to see how, in the final analysis, she delivers that more successfully than Plato.⁸⁵

Conclusion

It is a matter of taste to prefer Plato’s company and the company of his thoughts, even if this should lead us astray from truth.

So Arendt writes, quoting Cicero, in the final lines of the essay that ends *Between Past and Future*, “The Crisis in Culture”.⁸⁶ Strangely enough, Arendt did quite often prefer Plato’s company; she continued to teach seminars on Plato’s political thought right up until her death, exploring texts such as the *Laws* which were marginal in many Anglo-American Universities at the time.⁸⁷ Arendt’s readings may be unorthodox, but there is no doubt that she is reading the original texts carefully, in Greek, with much care and attention. Her readings are controversial, but her point is not to derive authority for her thinking by embedding it within a tradition, but to challenge the trajectory of that tradition in a way that might expose new avenues of thought.⁸⁸ This is the significance of those creative mis-readings. Where she quotes correctly from passages she evidently knows so well, and thrusts them into new contexts, she is inviting us to reconsider the tradition: what would it have been like if

⁸⁵ Concerns about her elitism have been raised by M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, p5; Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, p23; S. T. Holmes, “Aristippus In and Out of Athens”, *The American Political Science Review* (1979) vol. 73 (1), pp113-128. Holmes cites Constant’s criticisms of attempts to revive ancient notions of freedom and argues that modern tyranny may, in fact, be grounded in distortions of ancient notions of freedom (1957; first published in 1814 *De l’esprit de conquete et de usurpation. In Oeuvres*. Paris: Pleiade with Holmes, “Aristippus”, p 117. The idea that only politics provides a space for self-realisation makes it difficult to appreciate why citizens might want to resist the coercions of the state (1979: 113 n.1). A point with which Holmes agrees is that by crushing a healthy resistance to the state, transplanting ancient ideas of liberty into modern society “inevitably produces tyranny” (“Aristippus”, p116). He further argues that “the central insistence that government should be everywhere and politics can solve all of humanity’s fundamental problems is both alluring and irrational because it anachronistically echoes the Greek identification of the political sphere with total society”.

⁸⁶ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* I, 39-40.

⁸⁷ Arendt was invited by the distinguished ancient philosopher Gregory Vlastos to give a talk to the Advisory Council of the Department of Philosophy of Princeton University in September 1973, to which she was appointed. She delivered the Atherton lecture on Socrates at Harvard University on April 1975 just months before her death.

⁸⁸ Compare M. Leonard ‘Hannah Arendt and the Ancients’, p1-2.

Socrates had not been transmitted to us through Plato? What would it be like if Aristotle had not spent years in the Academy and had taken inspiration from Socrates in his political theorizing? Her readings call something into being which did not exist before in the traditions of reading these texts, she shows us what Socrates, Plato and Aristotle might mean if re-read afresh, if we read Socrates to reinvigorate deliberative discussion, Aristotle to theorize the value of action, and Plato to expose lines of thinking that endanger plural politics. This is the hermeneutics of natality. One can appreciate this point whilst acknowledging that her attempt to identify mistakes in the Greek philosophers is ultimately unpersuasive (as I have argued), and whilst believing that they expose weaknesses in her own account.

Why Plato should continue to be a part of that enterprise for Arendt is not easy to appreciate. Let us be clear, though, that to say that it is a matter of ‘taste’, for Arendt, is not to make a purely aesthetic point; for, “taste, belongs among the political faculties”.⁸⁹ The point is to advocate an attitude that knows “how to take care and preserve and admire the things of this world”, in such a way that we learn how to arbitrate and mediate between different activities, which are opposed to each other in many ways: “As humanists we can rise above these conflicts between the statesman and the artist, as we can rise in freedom above the specialties which we all must learn and pursue. We can rise above specialization and philistinism of all sorts to the extent that we learn how to exercise our taste freely”. If these texts are to speak to us in a political sense, what matters is to participate in the public realm of shared traditions, to take into account the presence of others, in whose place we can think, and whose perspective must be taken into consideration to develop “an enlarged mentality”.⁹⁰ By claiming that only then “we shall know how to reply to those who tell us that Plato or some other great author has been superseded”,⁹¹ she is surely championing Plato as an interlocutor who is not an enemy of the plural community, but someone whose presence within it is an indicator of a truly political spirit.⁹²

⁸⁹ *Between Past and Future*, p215.

⁹⁰ For her use of this Kantian phrase, see *Between Past and Future*, p220-1; *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p10; Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, p270-1.

⁹¹ *Between Past and Future*, p225.

⁹² I would like to thank Arif Ahmed, Christopher Rowe, Andrea Sangiovanni, Malcolm Schofield, James Warren and Waseem Yaqoob for discussion of this paper.