



DOCTORAL THESIS

The Fate of Judgement

Hannah Arendt, The Third Critique and Aspects of Contemporary Political Philosophy

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The Fate of Judgement

**Hannah Arendt, The Third Critique and
Aspects of Contemporary Political
Philosophy**

By

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

In this work I examine the role of judgment in the writings of Hannah Arendt. I argue that consideration of this concept helps to shed light on her important contribution to political philosophy, and in particular on the often overlooked radical aspects of her work. Judgment lies at the heart of a cluster of characteristically ‘Arendtian’ themes: those of natality, plurality, narrative and the relation between political action, thought and disclosure, as well as her notions of political public space and its relation to past and future. I argue that in adapting Kant’s conception of judgment as presented in his *Critique of Judgment*, Arendt also inherits a problematic pair of ideas associated with it: ‘Taste’ and *sensus communis*. These concepts, I suggest, raise questions of authority, exclusion and participation that were already politically coded in Kant. Examining the part they came to play in Arendt’s thought helps us to see a significant problematic for a political thought that would aspire to be critical and radical. Specifically, it exposes two closely interlinked questions: that of the limits of the political (its character and distinctiveness) and that of the political subjects themselves (the notion of proper and improper political subjects). I conclude that an engagement with the role of reflective judgment in Arendt is an illuminating and important way to understand both the radical current in Arendt’s thought and the challenge faced by any radical political thought at the opening of the twenty-first century.

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The Fate of Judgment

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Introduction

1

This is a study of the role of judgment in the work of Hannah Arendt. The aim is to shed light on the concept through a close study of the ways in which it was developed and deployed by Arendt in some of her key texts. Judgment lies at the heart of her work, and investigating its place in her writings is a way into what is most valuable about her thought. Although the place of judgment in Arendt's work has been considered before, this study differs from other discussions in a number of significant ways.¹ I try to show that judgment, and reflective judgment in particular, provides a unique vantage point for understanding the meaning and significance of the cluster of key ideas Arendt works with: natality, plurality, narrative, thinking etc; reflective judgment is revealed as the key central concept that allows us to connect Arendt's concern with the spatial (public space, borders, boundaries etc) to her thinking about past and future. So judgment is revealed as a kind of 'nodal point' in her work.

Arendt inherits the concept of 'reflective judgment' from Kant, adapting it to her own purposes and using it in ways that go well beyond its presentation in the *Critique of Judgment*. As we shall see, there are some difficulties with her use of the term, and with the way it is connected to ideas about 'taste' and common sense, and some of these difficulties can be traced back to Kant's original presentation. To put it briefly, while

¹ The most notable recent contribution is probably *Judgment, Imagination and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt* ed. Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001. But many of the main commentaries on Arendt deal with it at some length.

reflective judgment seems oriented to the future, to creation and the radically new in human affairs, 'taste' can look like a *conservative* concept. 'Taste' signifies a restraint on the *inventio* of judgment, dividing individuals and groups into those with it and those without it: the refined and the unrefined, the elite and the mass or mob. 'Taste', like 'common sense', is not innocent of ideology. Seeing quite why judgment and common sense turn out to be so difficult for her to use helps to clarify something quite characteristic of her thought. It is that Arendt seems to present (at least) two *personae*: one 'conservative' and the other 'radical'. I argue that it is her use of reflective judgment that is truly valuable and radical, but that her struggle with the ambiguous inheritance of taste and *sensus communis* is itself instructive.

In the view I am arguing for here, reflective judgment is a name for the way in which Arendt conceives us to be disclosing ourselves to others in a creative manner that allows the advent of the genuinely new beyond the nihilism of the Twentieth Century, in a public realm that is also a dimension of meaning. Apart from the interesting things Arendt has to say about the advent and crisis of political modernity, she has an importantly fresh conception of the way in which judgment can preserve, renew and transform our public political space. Arendt views herself as a kind of phenomenologist, and for her that which is true is not that which is hidden but that which *appears*. The public sphere is the place in which we preserve our sense of the reality of others, and where, in a way that is essentially adult, we take responsibility for our shared world (and for changing that world). The exercise of reflective judgment, involving as it does the use of imagination and the acknowledgement of the presence of others, is thus at the heart of politics, and indeed of the possibility of a meaningful public life together. The problem here is the relation between this conception of politics / judgment and the private, social and economic areas of life. Arendt is famous for her insistence on a sharp dividing line

between the public political space and everything else. While I do not subscribe to any such pronounced division, I try to show why she might have a point in insisting on the distinctive nature of political life, before suggesting ways in which we might conceive of the relation between the various zones or spheres of life.

There is something elusive, protean and hard to categorise about Arendt's writing. This is not surprising. Arendt's tendency to present different *personae* in her work makes it hard to 'place' her politically and philosophically. I suggest that this is because in reading her, we are reading someone who is *constantly thinking* rather than seeking to present the reader with a finished set of conclusions. In this she is, it seems to me, authentically Socratic². To read Arendt is to follow her 'thought trains' in order to see where they go. The effect may sometimes be to confuse the reader as to Arendt's intent, but is, at its frequent best, remarkably thought provoking. She tends to keep pushing on, in a perpetual questioning of all that stands. She is a *critical* thinker.

Given all this, it is remarkable how often she is identified as some kind of liberal or conservative. For there is much in Arendt's thinking that is authentically radical. Unsystematic as she is, she nevertheless pursues certain themes with remarkable consistency. Apart from her critique of liberalism, which she came to see as working to obliterate the promise of the revolutionary enlightenment, she retained a fascination for what she called *natality*, the capacity to bring about the absolutely new in human affairs. Arendt is interested in the unprecedented. This is the radical, even utopian, spirit in her work and it relates to her interest in revolutions. The capacity to initiate the absolutely new requires a kind of leap that can only be prepared by a kind of imaginative move that

² This also helps to explain the difficulty in locating an Arendtian *magnum opus*: there is no one text that epitomises her thought. The attempt to do this, to identify say, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* or *The Life of the Mind* as her 'key' work does a kind of violence to the *processive* quality of her thought. This is nearly as misleading as the related tendency to find a misleadingly simple label for her work as a whole.

exceeds law, rule or precept, and this is her understanding of the political meaning of reflective judgment.

Arendt's discussion of judgment is not unproblematic, to be sure. Yet the very difficulties she finds herself in are illuminating. In wrestling with the cluster of ideas that she takes from Kant (especially the ideas of 'Taste' and *sensus communis*) she begins to expose some of the central problems of political modernity, especially the character of the political subject or citizen. Far from a simple politicisation of Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment, we find that it was implicitly political all along. The question of what to make of reflective judgment opens out into a wider question of the way in which we might think, judge and act politically in the future. I argue that any response that would seek to be adequate must think of the disclosive quality of political judgment as occurring in a context of *dissensus* and struggle, rather than a supposedly undivided and exclusive *sensus communis*.

2

The first chapter opens with the trial and execution of Adolf Eichmann. I begin with this because I take it that this was a pivotal moment in Arendt's development³. Arendt's presence at the trial and her subsequent book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on The Banality of Evil* (1963) seems to be the place in which her previous thinking on history, totalitarianism and the human condition meet the question of what it is to think and judge, to bring about the advent of the new in a way that remains responsible to the past. Her physical presence in that courtroom, alongside her contemporary, the accused,⁴ places her as someone striving to think about the history that had brought them both to a courtroom in Jerusalem in 1960. I take the opportunity in this chapter to sketch some of that history and to compare her thinking alongside that of some contemporaries of a

³ Of course it was a lot more than that –for Israel, for the way the Nazi genocide would be understood, etc.

⁴ They were both born in 1906.

very different type to Eichmann. Arendt always held that narrative and the consideration of real historical examples was central to gaining a sense of the meaning of the ‘dark times’ she wrote about; and in this and subsequent chapters I present some individuals who are, in various ways, exemplary.

In the second chapter I try to show what it was about Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* that Arendt found so inspiring. In a close reading of the text I endeavour to show what it was about reflective judgment that Arendt went on to apply to her thinking about politics. I also seek to show that certain problems (aporias, perhaps) in Kant’s text were central to the way in which he conceived the operation of reflective judgment, and that these recur in Arendt. She applies in a modulated way what he has to say about judgment, ‘common human understanding’ and the *sensus communis*, but this imports into her work, like a virus, the problem of Taste. Such difficulties are not merely contingent or easily transcended. They go to the heart of political thinking in modernity, and run like a thread through Arendt’s meditations on culture, consumerism and education. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of her ‘Understanding and Politics’, a text that displays many of Arendt’s central concerns about thinking, truth and politics as they were on the eve of her engagement with the problem of Eichmann.

In chapter three I turn to the major works Arendt produced before and immediately after the Eichmann trial, beginning with *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). I take this to be a key text. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* we see Arendt producing a strange, hybrid text, a kind of ‘analytical narrative’ approach to the writing of history and the history of ideas (for Arendt the two are inseparable). Arendt is thinking carefully about narrative and history, and there is a decisive rejection of any kind of determinism in the understanding of how the modern age took on the character that it did. As a

historian of a sort here, Arendt was concerned to produce a narrative that would give the bare facts *meaning*, a story of how certain elements in recent history crystallised: ‘the event illuminates its own past, but can never be deduced from it’. We see that Arendt is producing what amounts to an indictment of bourgeois society –and the way in which the bourgeois replaces the *citoyen*. This feature not only goes a long way to rebutting the view that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is somehow a tract of liberal cold war polemics, but also helps to show why her thinking on these topics remains relevant long after the fall of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. Arendt’s unwillingness to provide answers, and her corresponding willingness to let events change her mind as she is writing partly explains the book’s peculiar structure. Later in the chapter I examine some of the ideas and tropes Arendt uses, and it is clear that most of Arendt’s key preoccupations are being aired already at this relatively early stage. It is in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that we see the emergence of important questions about what kind of *topos* might be necessary for a genuine politics, and thus for the kind of judgment that is the subject of the present work. I then consider *The Human Condition* (1958) and *On Revolution* (1963). In *The Human Condition*, Arendt approaches many of the themes of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but in a different, more conceptual key. Both books share a preoccupation with the way we appear to each other, and the institutions and spaces that make this appearance possible or impossible. In *On Revolution* the question of the meaning of the American and French revolutions for Arendt is discussed. In her thinking about the success/failure of the two revolutions we see Arendt raising questions about the capacity of humans to initiate something new, the way this can be vitiated by contingencies and the question of the relation between revolutionaries and masses. We see here, I argue, the re-emergence of the *sensus communis*/common understanding opposition present in Kant: a problem of ‘political taste’.

In chapter four I return to the historical and intellectual context in which judgment emerges as central to politics. I locate judgment as a historical problem for an ‘enlightened’ thinking in the wake of an exhausted conception of political modernity, one marked by the experience of an emergent market economy dependent on the labour of a workforce ‘disciplined’ by the factory system. It is in the context of these considerations that Arendt’s work can be seen as a unique contribution to the radical critique of liberalism. Although it is clear that this critique must attend to economic and social issues in a way that Arendt is tempted to evade, I argue for the continuing relevance in particular of her conceptions of *amor mundi* and natality. Both are profoundly connected to her conception of judgment as essential to the preservation of meaning in an age of nihilism.

Chapter five turns to Arendt’s unfinished last work, *The Life of the Mind* (1978), as well as the posthumously published lectures on Judgment, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (1982). I attempt here to consider what kind of view of judgment Arendt had developed by the time she died. In my view, judgment forms the centre piece of her thinking about what it is to be one among others, in a *topos* in which judgment and action disclose who we are, and initiate the new in the face of a past which we strive to understand through narrative (itself a kind of judgment). I consider the views of Lyotard and Castoriadis on Arendt’s conception of judgment, and argue that she is proposing a conception of judgment in politics that is distinct from either of these two thinkers.

Finally, in chapter six, I return to the central questions about Arendt’s Kant-inflected account of judgment. These can be summarised as (1) the question of *who*

judges, that is, the character of the proper political subject that arose through our discussion of taste and the *sensus communis*, and (2) the question of *what* counts as political – of what ‘the political’ is supposed to be and how it might relate to economic and social life. I discuss these questions in the light of three contemporary readers of Arendt: Žižek, Agamben and Ranciere, examining the ways in which they have read or misread her. I conclude that the Arendtian conception of judgment as central to public political life ought to be conceived of as emerging from and constituted by struggles in economic and social life. The image of the plural world of reflective judges is really that of a free world, on the condition that the promise of that world is understood as potentially including *everyone*.

3

The problematic of judgment resonates beyond Arendt. To think carefully about judgment and taste is to think in a certain way about the political. It is to engage with a number of problems that confront anyone trying to understand the relation between those who consciously try to think, act and judge as citizens (political subjects) and those who do not, or cannot. This theme illuminates a set of difficulties present in post enlightenment thought, articulated in Kant but persisting in the post-critical aftermath. These are problems of authorisation and legitimation arising when a tradition is ruptured or broken. ‘Enlightenment’ itself can be represented as a kind of break, one that raises new problems of authorisation of judgment: for if we think for ourselves, where shall our standards and rules for correct judgment be found –and who is this ‘we’ of judgment? There is the recurring temptation to refer to some authorising principle to take the burden of judgment off the backs of mere individuals –some ‘Big Other’: the ‘Iron Laws’ of History, or Nature, or the Market. And of course the very notion of the autonomous

judgments of free citizens was challenged from the outset and has come into question in new ways in the societies that were shaped by the experience of modernisation and war.⁵

The kind of ‘break’ Arendt is concerned with appears in thought but also in history: in the world wars, totalitarian movements and genocide of the mid Twentieth Century. She is clear that this crisis of authority has its roots well back, at least to the Eighteenth Century, and she follows them, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in particular, to the problematic sense that the ‘Rights of Man’ were to have in the post revolutionary nation states of Europe and America, to the growth of imperialism, political anti Semitism and mass ‘pan Slav’ and ‘pan German’ movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These events are the background or back-story for what I take to be the crux of Arendt’s work: the Eichmann trial of 1960. I therefore pay particular attention to Eichmann’s testimony, and what Arendt made of it. It was with the trial and its immediate aftermath that Arendt’s thinking about history and the human condition combined with the fresh thinking about judgment that was to crystallise many of Arendt’s ideas. Eichmann was a man who was able to do his job efficiently, and he was even able to recall an approximate version of Kant’s Categorical Imperative during the trial. Yet for Arendt he was somehow someone who ‘did not think’, had not thought was he was doing. Arendt’s response to the Eichmann trial was to mark much of her future work on thinking and judgment.

I aim to consider certain Arendtian themes of judgment and modernity in a fresh light. Accordingly, this study seeks to move the discussion away from some of the debates prevalent in some recent Arendt scholarship. I shall engage directly with such

⁵ The challenge appears sometimes as a critique of the *political* meaning of the ‘masses’, the people, and sometimes of the very idea of a ‘public’, the mob etc., in modernity. Anxiety about this has been articulated from a wide range of perspectives and is posed in a great variety of ways, e.g., De Maistre, Kierkegaard (*The Present Age*), Schmitt, Heidegger, etc.

debates only where they touch on the things that concern me, while only glancing at the secondary literature where different battles are being fought over other aspects of her legacy. Even where commentators do directly address the question of judgment, it is often approached in a significantly different way to the one I have adopted here. Much debate has focused, for instance, on the question of whether Arendt's conception of judgment should be understood in a way that emphasises the rational grounding of a community in shared norms. This approach can have a 'Habermasian' angle, which may or may not invoke Aristotelian notions of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Arendt is then assessed as having succeeded or failed in achieving a satisfactory account in those terms (Benhabib, Kateb etc). The problem here is that the rational grounding of the community is not Arendt's central concern. Arendt's conception of reflective judgment invokes the radical contingency and unpredictability of creation, of the *event* that exceeds all existing norms.⁶ This is why the concept of natality comes up in her work with such regularity. It is this characteristic that the 'Habermasians' find so unsettling as she seems to be problematically 'beyond good and evil' in her commitment to the radically new. At the other extreme to the Habermasians are those who emphasise the 'expressivist' or performative dimension of her thought, whether understood as a kind of existentialism (Hinchman and Hinchman) or a kind of post-modern, post- Foucauldian, Nietzschean use of personae (Villa). What this tendency sometimes neglects is the way in which Arendt presents judgment as the work of plural subjects who sustain a meaningful public world –a vital bulwark against nihilism, and one that involves a deep appreciation of the importance of truth. Arendt is not a postmodernist *avant la lettre*.

Nor is she a liberal. What both 'Habermasian' and 'postmodernist' accounts tend to miss is her critique of the liberalism that many of them take for granted as the frame in

⁶ In her emphasis on the *event* as a radical break with what went before Arendt anticipates Alain Badiou. See the final chapter of the present work.

which twenty-first century politics must operate. In the case of the ‘Habermasians’ Arendt is seen as the sometimes errant proponent of a dialogical, consensus-based politics. While the more postmodern or existentialist accounts seem to me to be a little closer to what she is mainly doing in her work, an overemphasis on the performance of individual actors caught up in a play of difference risks missing the *politics* in Arendt. The historical account of modernity that she launches in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and continues in the rest of her writings amounts to an incisive critique of both liberalism and the privative, atomising political economy of possessive individualism that accompanies it.

Arendt’s thought does not have one single thesis or ‘big idea’, and she did not produce a magnum opus in which that idea, or ideas, might have been displayed. Nor does her work show a simple progression towards any kind of *telos*. I follow Arendt’s thought, with especial emphasis on the period 1945-75 as it develops and changes through several of her important texts - *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *The Life of the Mind* etc. Those texts present a cluster of themes that keep recurring, ‘thought trains’ that wind round the same group of ideas – natality, plurality, action and thinking etc, as they apply to modern political life in particular.⁷ It can be hard to make sense of what Arendt is saying across these texts over this time. This can be frustrating, but it is also a source of her peculiar strength and longevity as a thinker. She is not ‘saying’ one thing, but rather *thinking* all the time. I argue that in this stream of thought, of texts with their various occasions and historical moments it is judgment, as Arendt begins to think about it, that helps us to get perspective on the other things she has to say. This is not because ‘judgment’ is her big idea, but because it helps to get our bearings on the constellation of ideas she works with, and because ‘judgment’

⁷ ‘Thought trains’ is Richard Bernstein’s phrase. See his discussion of Arendt’s characteristic way of thinking in ‘Is Evil Banal? A Misleading Question’ in Berkowitz et. al., 2010.

is a unique way of grasping what the crux of the problem is that she is confronting, and that we still confront today.

There is no one ‘Arendt’, and it is now possible to see that it is seriously misleading to frame Arendt as some kind of liberal or conservative apologist of ‘the West’ in the Cold War. In fact, I argue that she is quite other than this. Arendt can be seen as a ‘political phenomenologist’ or ‘political existentialist’ working in the wake of a catastrophe, with some important, critical insights into what had gone wrong with ‘liberal’ capitalist societies as well as the totalitarian opponents they faced for much of the Twentieth Century. It is her analysis of those societies that survived the challenge of Hitler and Stalin that provides a key to her contemporaneity, for the defects and dangers *they* pose to human freedom have not been transcended. Thus she has some remarkably apposite things to say about the world as it is at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For what she has to say about the problem of judgment, and the way it is embedded in an ineluctably plural world speaks to our present condition, to the post cold war world with its new social movements, the crisis of political authority and credibility and the possibilities shaped by the development of capitalism and new technologies of communication. Arendt was interested in the Kantian conception of judgment because she could see that it was essentially political in its import. It is political because it is *plural*: it starts from the idea of multiple judges, none of whom are authoritative, and all requiring the presence of others.

Arendt’s sharp analysis of political modernity is radical and exemplary. For her, the survival of a public dimension to our lives is essential, not only to any healthy polity, but to the sense that there *is* a reality, that it includes others who are not the same as oneself, and that the world has meaning. And it is judgment that lies at the heart of this

counter-nihilist direction in her work. I do not claim that the radical meaning I descry in her work on judgment is the final, 'definitive' one, but that it is a major presence is undeniable, as I shall show. Still, it is important to keep a sense of the protean nature of her thought in order to do justice to its richness: to grasp Arendt now we must be capable of seeing her as complex. Thus we must sometimes think against her, as well as with her. I think this is the only way to be true to her spirit.

Chapter 1

Judgment in Jerusalem

1

Adolf Eichmann was hanged in Jerusalem on June 1st 1962, a little after midnight. He drank a half a bottle of red wine, but refused a last meal. At the end he did not wear a black hood that was offered to him: after saying that he was not a Christian and had no faith in an after life, he went on to say ‘after a short while, gentlemen, we shall all meet again. Such is the fate of all men. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria. I shall not forget them’. Then the lever was released, and he was hanged. He had been found guilty by an Israeli court of ‘crimes against the Jewish people’ and ‘crimes against humanity’.

That is one way of telling the story of the execution of Adolf Eichmann. We have no reason to suppose it is in any way inaccurate or misleading as it stands. But there are many ways of telling a story of course, as many ways as there are possible narrators. This would be the case for any incident, however trivial. In the case of the execution of a war criminal the matter becomes more fraught - there seems to be so much more at stake. The version above, for instance, represents the events as they are given in Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. We could look again at the same scene from a less well-known source - that of the executioner, Shalom Nagar⁸, or perhaps from the statements, other witnesses, and the official record. Beyond those at the event itself were and are the army of commentators. The main participant, Eichmann, is unavailable for comment.

We tell stories for many reasons and in many ways. One important reason, Arendt reminds us, is to find a way to find meaning; the narrator is a maker of a story that will help us to come to terms with what has happened. Understanding the meaning of what has befallen us, or others, is the necessary condition for being able to judge. And of course the narration itself is

⁸ Interviewed by Ginsberg. See Ginsberg, R 2005.

the effect of judgment - what to leave out, what to put in, the words one selects, the events one dwells on. As such, they cannot be final: even the most conscientious attempt to get the story straight, to tell it like it is, or was, is not 'definitive'.

Not that all stories are equally true, useful or good, of course. But the meanings that emerge from history, if they emerge at all, arise in large part from our compulsion to tell and retell these stories. We are never really done with them.

So it is with the trial and execution of Adolf Eichmann. Arendt's account stands among the others. What follows is an attempt to understand the meaning she found in the Eichmann trial: Arendt's Eichmann. Eichmann's significance here will be as a way into the heart of Arendt's central concern - the very possibility of living together politically in the contemporary world.⁹ This is an issue of obvious concern to all of us; the purpose of this work is to both understand and assess Arendt's views, and to consider their relevance for the contemporary world. The execution, which was our beginning, follows a longer story: the trial of the man Israeli security agents had kidnapped in Argentina and taken to Jerusalem for judgment, and behind that lies *another* story, and so on.

Eichmann's trial and execution is of particular significance as it sheds light on something deeply troubling. Hannah Arendt, who had been at the trial, though not at the execution, commented on what she called the 'grotesque silliness' of Eichmann's last words, words that showed he was 'fully himself'. She was referring to the 'clichés of the funeral oration' he had uttered at the end 'forgetting that this was his own funeral.' for Arendt, those clichés served as

⁹ The Eichmann trial is often regarded as a turning point in Arendt's career. See for instance Leah Bradshaw, who regards it as pivotal in moving Arendt's attention from acting/speaking to thinking/judging. But Bradshaw thinks that *The Life of the Mind* 'repudiates the basic assumption' of *The Human Condition*. See Bradshaw 1989 chapter 3, and also pp. 7-8 for a succinct statement of her position. For Eichmann as negative exemplar for Arendt see Lara, 2007 p.19 and chapter 4, *passim*.

a final reminder of what was significant about this man:

it was as if in these last minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course of human wickedness had taught us - the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-denying *banality of evil*¹⁰

‘The banality of evil’: Arendt’s identification of Eichmann as a somehow *thoughtless* man, one who replaced reflection on the murder he was committing by clichés and formulae has become famous, so much so that it too risks joining the army of clichés, another formula to replace thought. Yet the question remains: what was it about Eichmann that she saw as significant? To see if this phrase points towards something important for us we need to look again at this man, what it was about him that would prompt Arendt to spend many weeks covering his trial for the *New Yorker* magazine and lead to a controversy that still has life in it half a century on.¹¹ What Arendt saw in Eichmann was something that remains present and troubling today. This was the abdication from genuine thinking and judging that she named, an absence that accompanied him through his role in the central crime of the Twentieth Century and left him at the end with the ‘grotesque silliness’ of his last words.¹² The revelation in Jerusalem was that a high-ranking Nazi, an agent of genocide was just a colourless bureaucrat. And the manner in which this functionary did evil was as far from the demonic or sadistic as one could imagine –it was *banal* indeed. Arendt did not claim that evil is a banal concept, but that those who sit in offices and bring it about it are just that: not monsters but ordinary people who do not think. This banality, or ordinariness, is the disturbing reality that makes Eichmann a kind of negative exemplar, a representative figure for our times. The trial gave Arendt the opportunity to encounter the phenomenon right in front of her eyes.¹³

¹⁰ Arendt, 1968, p. 252.

¹¹ See RJ Bernstein’s ‘Is Evil Banal? A Misleading Question’ for a critical discussion of the uses of this term in Berkowitz et. al. 2010; see also Peter Baehr for a dismissal of the phrase in Berkowitz et. al. 2010 P.142. He calls it (using Orwell’s phrase) ‘silly cleverness’.

¹² See d’Entreves, 1994 on Eichmann as prompt for Arendt: pp. 107-8.

¹³ See Fine, 2001 pp. 157-159 for a defence of the term ‘banality of evil’. Apart from Bernstein’s 2010 essay in Berkowitz et. al., the meaning and validity of Arendt’s notion of banality of evil has provoked much discussion. May’s

Eichmann had been a Nazi bureaucrat. Born in Solingen, Germany in 1906 he was brought up in Austria. He had joined the party in 1932 after an undistinguished career, as, among other things, a vacuum salesman. The party was his chance to change all that, and by the end of the war he has risen to lieutenant colonel. As such he was responsible for much of the transport arrangements that took millions of Jews and others to the extermination camps. When the war ended he went into hiding, and then fled abroad, to Argentina where he lived until 1958 when Israeli agents kidnapped him and took him to Jerusalem for trial.

The crimes of the Nazi state and its various accomplices across Europe are well known in outline. Accounting *for* those crimes, for the people who actually did the deeds, remains ‘thought denying’ indeed: one struggles to comprehend it. One approach is to see the Nazis, particularly the ones with power and influence, as monsters deformed by anti-Semitism and lust for destruction. This has the satisfying effect of appearing to match the deeds of ‘radical evil’ (Kant) with suitable terms, but it has its limitations as an explanation: they did what they did *because they were evil*. Apart from its circularity, it lacks plausibility as an explanation for mass death across a continent on an industrial scale, for even if the Nazi leadership can be accounted for in such terms it stretches credulity to suppose the myriads that did their bidding were all either psychopaths or guiltless dupes. And another effect of this kind of ‘explanation’ is that it releases us from further thought, since they were somehow ‘born evil’¹⁴. In any case, this is not the way Arendt came to see Eichmann¹⁵. In him she saw a man who far from being some monster of depravity and insane fanaticism was rather a functionary. Literally: a man who had

Socialisation and Institutional Evil (in May & Kohn, 1996) is more sympathetic to the term, linking it strongly to the issue of thoughtlessness. It is very important to be clear about what is meant by ‘thoughtlessness’ here: it does not mean stupidity or simple dullness, as we shall see.

¹⁴ In which case, of course, they were no more responsible for their deeds than one would be ‘responsible’ for being born with a disease due to a genetic malfunction. See Goldhagen, 1996 *passim* for the view that every German was guilty; Eagleton provides what is to my mind a much more satisfactory account of the nature of evil. See Eagleton, 2010 *passim*.

¹⁵ Leora Bilsky describes Arendt’s approach as essentially phenomenological: instead of looking beneath or behind his words, Arendt confronts the Eichmann that stood in the dock and poured forth a stream of clichés and platitudes – a man who ‘used language to block out reality’. Leora Y. Bilsky in Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001, p. 207. For a critique of Bilsky, see Parvikko, 2008 pp. 243-249.

become a function of the Nazi state. For Arendt, Eichmann's culpability lay in the way he had allowed himself to commit such acts, while seeing himself as an ordinary man doing his duty as an official of the state. Arendt found this 'ordinary' quality more disturbing than the 'Nazi monster' one might have expected. And she noted his failure to think about what he was doing. He was a *thoughtless* man.

This does not mean he was stupid. He performed quite skilled tasks, oversaw numerous other bureaucrats and functionaries, and acted with a good deal of resource and effort when it came to ensuring the successful liquidation of Jews in obedience to the Fuhrer's will. What Arendt found lacking in Eichmann takes us to the heart of what she meant by thinking and judging. In addition, it takes us to a central problem of today. For the 'banality of evil' resonates beyond the Israeli courtroom in 1961 or the Nazi regime of 1933-45. The kind of thoughtlessness Arendt found in Eichmann is surely present, in peace and war, in our world, now. The Eichmann story is paradigmatic: its significance lies not only as another reminder of the horrors of the past but a warning about the present and the future.

This is why we need to understand what it is, and what makes it possible. Arendt's account of what happened to modernity and how it could have produced this servant of industrialised death goes beyond both the Nazi totalitarianism (another word she made famous) and the phenomenon of bureaucratised death-in-life. It takes us to the nature of modernity itself, the fate of the enlightenment, of its inheritors – ourselves. The true character of Arendt's project gives her work an importance that goes far beyond the hot and cold wars and totalitarianisms of the Twentieth Century. Arendt's work, and in particular her meditations on thinking, judging and the plural nature of the human condition, hold a mirror up to modernity.

So Arendt's analytical narrative is a pursuit of meaning, and not just more facts. In

Eichmann in Jerusalem she questions the purpose of this trial of a Nazi bureaucrat. The answer to this may seem obvious.¹⁶ After all, the defendant had been indicted on 15 counts of ‘crimes against humanity, crimes against the Jewish people and war crimes’. But it was clear that this very public trial had other purposes apart from the trial and punishment of a Nazi. Among the motives at work was the desire to make a political point about the Israel of 1961 - to contrast its self-respect and strength with the supposed ‘meekness’ with which European Jews went to their deaths. Another was to put anti-semitism itself on trial - and to make the nations of the earth ashamed. Arendt’s comments on these motives are scathing. She comments on the cruelty and insensitivity of the argument that the Jewish victims of the Nazis did not put up enough of a fight, pointing to the effect of a documented attempt on the part of unarmed Jewish civilians in Amsterdam to turn on their guards: Nazi retribution took the form of a savagery that would make death in a gas chamber seem enviable. As for the desire to put anti-semitism on trial through the person of Eichmann, Arendt comments dryly on the superfluity of such a gesture in 1961. After all that happened in Europe the link between anti-semitism and murder was already clear - at least for the time being.

That left the accused, as one whose complicity in murder needed to be tried and punished. Yet even here the prosecution missed its mark. This was partly due to Eichmann’s preferred mode of defence: to the 15 counts his plea was ‘not guilty in the sense of the indictment. [...] In what sense did he think he *was* guilty?’¹⁷

Arendt notes that this question was never put.

For Arendt, the question of Eichmann’s culpability *was* worth pursuing. He claimed he had never killed anyone. He allowed that he was an accessory to murder only in a strictly

¹⁶ On the question of the legal-political meaning of the trial see Felman, ‘Theaters of justice: Arendt in Jerusalem, the Eichmann trial and the Redefinition of Legal Meaning in the Wake of the Holocaust’, pp. 339-376, in Allen 2008; for a critique of Felman’s general position see Parvikko, 2008, pp. 238-243. According to Parvikko, Felman has failed to see the political significance of the trial.

¹⁷ Arendt, 1968 p. 21.

qualified sense. As a law-abiding citizen, he had followed the laws of the state as it then was: only retrospectively could he be accused of any crimes. He insisted that he had a clear conscience; he had had no base motives and was not even anti-semitic. The court did not believe him. Here, for Arendt, they

missed the greatest moral and even legal challenge of the whole case. Their case rested on the assumption that the defendant, like all 'normal persons', must have been aware of the criminal nature of his acts, and Eichmann was indeed normal insofar as he was 'no exception within the Nazi regime'. However, under the conditions of the Third Reich only 'exceptions' could be expected to react 'normally'. This simple truth of the matter created a dilemma for the judges, which they could neither resolve nor escape.¹⁸

Eichmann in Jerusalem gradually reveals the man in the dock as an industrious functionary and careerist.¹⁹ This bureaucrat was hard at work a good deal of the time on 'forced emigration' (deporting Jews) and then, after 1942, the assembly and transfer of victims across Europe to the death camps. He was certainly involved in mass murder, but what Arendt noted was the peculiarity of this 'normal' man's mind, as betrayed by his words.

Arendt comments on Eichmann's 'heroic struggle with the German language' in the German text of the police interrogation of Eichmann. All his attempts to explain, to clarify or to justify were sunk in cliché and stock phrases. He even seemed half aware of it himself, apologising at one point: 'officialese is my only language'. He seemed incapable of uttering a sentence that was not a cliché, and she comments in an aside that this characteristic might have contributed to the 'normality' that the examining psychologists saw in him. "Empty talk" the judges called it, and although they were right, they seemed to think it covered up other thoughts that were hideous

¹⁸ Arendt, 1968 pp. 26-7.

¹⁹ See Barry Sharpe's *Modesty and Arrogance in Judgment* (1999) for a book-length study of Arendt's response to the Eichmann trial as a kind of exemplar of what judgment is and might be. Sharpe is interested in the way judgment makes a bond or relationship between people. The text stays close to the trial itself as well as its immediate aftermath – the controversy arising from Arendt's report. For a discussion of Arendt's ideas on thinking in connection with the Eichmann trial see Michael Mack: 'Hannah Arendt's philosophy of plurality: Thinking and Understanding and Eichmann in Jerusalem', in Schaap et. al. 2010 pp. 13-26.

and far from empty –as if they concealed something demonic deep within him.

Arendt saw the matter differently. For her, the ex-Nazi bureaucrat's empty talk reflected an emptiness in the man:

The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and presence of others, and hence against reality as such.²⁰

Eichmann's clichés were the prefabricated talk of a man who could remember the dates of his promotions, but not those of important events that had occurred during his time in the SS, like the invasion of the USSR. He was capable of 'elating' himself with such phrases right up to his last moments on the scaffold. The emptiness was connected to the normality, a normality that made Eichmann more significant for us now than any 'monster' could ever be.

Arendt makes the point in her book that the inability to think, the careerism, the prefabricated chatter etc., were not limited to Eichmann himself. Of course the Nazis Eichmann looked to were not likely to give him a reason not to follow the Fuhrer's will. Quite the contrary. The Wansee conference of 1942 - at which the 'final solution' got its official start - provided him with the opportunity to overcome any lingering doubts about "such a bloody solution through violence"

'Here, now, during this conference, the most prominent people had spoken, the Popes of the Third Reich'. Now he could see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears that not only Hitler, not only Heydrich or the 'sphinx' Muller, not just the SS or the Party, but the elite of the good old Civil Service were vying and fighting with each

²⁰ Ibid. p. 49.

other for the honour of taking the lead in these 'bloody' matters. 'At that moment, I sensed a kind of Pontius Pilate feeling, for I felt free of all guilt'. *Who was he to judge?* Who was he 'to have [his] own thoughts in this matter'? ²¹

Indeed, everything seemed to work together for the final solution: the Reich's legal experts, its banking and transport facilities and when requested by Eichmann the 'Jewish councils of elders made out the lists of deportees.'²² The process involved more than mere compliance - it removed practical difficulties and contributed to an atmosphere in which questions of right and wrong would not be raised - not that it is likely that that would have made any difference. Only at the end of the war, when it was clear that Germany had lost, were there 'defections', and these were more often motivated by corruption than conscience. Himmler's attempt to do a deal in 1945, using Jewish lives as bargaining counters is the most egregious example of this:

'As Eichmann told it, the most potent factor in the soothing of his own conscience was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who actually was against the Final solution'. ²³

When he did encounter an exception - a Herr Kastner, involved in a deal to exchange trucks for Jewish lives - who asked him to stop the murders in Austria, Eichmann replied that it was outside his or his immediate superiors' competence to issue such an order, and this may have been technically correct. Eichmann was committed to the efficient and effective completion of his task and what he expected from the Jews was co-operation, and that is mainly what he got. Locally recognised leaders of the Jewish communities were drawn into the process of selecting and exporting Jews to their destruction.

²¹ Ibid. p.114. See Clarke 'Beyond the Banality of Evil' 1980, esp. p 437 for the link between Eichmann's will and his failure to judge.

²² Ibid. p. 115.

²³ Ibid. p.116. See Dossa, 1989 chapter 5, especially pp.134-138, for a discussion of the sense in which Arendt viewed Eichmann as guilty, and its relation to the 'general moral collapse'.

The pages of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* concerning these issues were the major cause of the controversy over the book on publication in 1962.²⁴ That there had been some resistance was clear - as Arendt acknowledged. But it was not all from Zionists, as the Israeli government would have liked to claim. What there was had been quite weak and the exception to the general co-operation. The question went beyond the facts of the matter, touching on the meaning of such 'co-operation'. If Arendt was concerned with the meaning of the actions or inaction of the man in the dock she was also reflecting on what such compliance on the part of the Jewish elders, the civil authorities in the occupied territories and so on meant. One might not want to stop there - many commentators, notably Goldhagen, have wanted to assign guilt to the entire German people, or all gentiles, or the 'the west' in general.²⁵

Arendt herself took the view that the collective guilt approach was a barren one. For where all are guilty, no one is. For her it was important to keep open the idea of the responsibility of individuals for their actions. Killing, or arranging to have others killed, is a crime; Eichmann was surely guilty of this.²⁶ But participating in a general moral collapse goes beyond our normal categories of guilt and innocence, as we have seen; it is not something punishable in a court of law. To return to the Jews who helped the Nazis: if one can say anything general, anything apart from a judgment on what each person did, then surely we can agree with her that it was a mistake; that it partook in the same failure to grasp the meaning of what one was doing. In the end, though, it is surely the case that the flawed judgments and personal failings of the elders of the Jewish community are not the kind of punishable offences of which Eichmann stood and stands convicted. Nevertheless, there is a distinct similarity here with the illusion that one can sup with the devil and continue with something resembling

²⁴ See Parvikko, T 2008, *Arendt, Eichmann and the Politics of the Past*, *passim* but especially chapters 1 and 4 for an interesting account of the controversy and its possible meanings.

²⁵ See Goldhagen, 1996 *passim*.

²⁶ See J.L. Culbert, 'Judging the Events of our Time' on the difference between judging what Eichmann did and what Eichmann was. Arendt did the former, correctly in Culbert's (and in my) view. See the collection edited by Berkowitz et. al. 2010 pp. 146-150.

business as usual. This is the kind of thing we see in some of the civil authorities in the occupied territories, in Vichy for instance, where compliance too often shaded into collaboration and murder. There seems to have been an idea that as long as one went along with the legal demands of the properly constituted authorities one had done all that could be reasonably expected. Inwardly, of course, one might oppose the regime; outwardly one complied, as if acting were less important than one's 'inner' mental state.

For our purposes the fact of such general compliance and co-operation serves to illustrate Arendt's wider point:

I have dwelt on this because it offers the most striking insight into the totality of the moral collapse the Nazis caused in respectable European society - not only in Germany, but in almost all countries, not only among the persecutors, but also among the victims.²⁷

Hannah Arendt's verdict – that a moral collapse had engulfed victim and murderer alike – was enormously controversial. She was accused of lacking sensitivity, of confusing things, of slander, of being a self-hating Jew and even being on the side of the Nazis. Yet her view of what had happened under the Nazis was no rush to judgment.²⁸ It was an attempt to think about the meaning of what had happened, and what that had to tell us about judgment. Her life to that time, and not just her career as a political philosopher had given her a perspective on Eichmann and his crimes that provides a context for her assessment in 1961.²⁹

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²⁷ Arendt, 1968, pp. 125-6

²⁸ See Parvikko, 2008, especially chapter 6, for an acute analysis of what Arendt was 'doing' with the Eichmann case. Parvikko sees Arendt as trying to think the Eichmann trial –and by extension, the holocaust –politically, and not in terms of a singular event that could only be understood from the victims' perspective. In the context of Arendt's indictment of the entire western tradition of political thought, the failure of the Jewish leaders in the face of the Nazis becomes comprehensible, she argues. They were only a small part of a massive failure of judgment.

²⁹ See Sharpe, 1999, for an attempt to think about judgment through the Eichmann trial. Chapter 4 is devoted to the judgment Arendt made of the Jewish councils.

An exact contemporary of Eichmann's, Arendt was born to secular Jewish parents in Hanover, in 1906, growing up in Königsberg and Berlin. From 1922 she studied classics, then theology, and finally philosophy in the universities of Berlin, Marburg and Heidelberg. During this time she came under the influence of two philosophers: Martin Heidegger (with whom she has a brief affair) and then Karl Jaspers. Both were to remain important relationships in her life, as well as lasting intellectual influences; Heidegger, in particular, was to be a significant influence on her later work, although as we shall see she had important reservations about him.

From the mid-1920s Arendt became involved in Zionist politics, marrying the Jewish philosopher Gunther Stern in 1930. When the Nazis came to power in 1933 she was briefly involved in the resistance to the regime and was lucky to get out of Germany without paying a price for this. In Paris, her new home, she joined an émigré community that included Walter Benjamin. Arendt divorced Stern in 1939 and married a radical German and fellow refugee Heinrich Blücher in 1940.

When the German army overcame France in 1940 it was time to move again. It was then that an interesting event occurred which casts light on her later work, and may have helped to shape it. The French authorities detained Arendt, along with other female 'enemy aliens' (i.e. Jews and other refugees from Nazism). She was held first in a converted 'velo' stadium in Paris, and then in an internment camp in Gurs (Blücher had been sent with other men elsewhere). When France fell a few weeks after her arrival she got the chance to leave. In her words:

In the resulting chaos we succeeded in getting hold of liberation papers with which we were able to leave the camp [...]. None of us could 'describe' what lay in store for those who remained behind. All that we could do was tell

them what we expected would happen – the camp would be handed over to the victorious Germans.³⁰

Long before this happened the French authorities reasserted control and the gates were closed (as the camp was in the unoccupied but collaborative ‘Vichy’ part of France it was not until later that the Nazis gained full control of the camp):

the delay did not help the inmates. After a few days of chaos, everything became very regular again and escape was almost impossible. We rightly predicted this return to normalcy. It was a unique chance, but it meant one had to leave with nothing but a toothbrush since there existed no means of transportation.³¹

In 1942-43 most of the inmates (including 6,000 Jews later sent there by Adolf Eichmann with the compliance of the Vichy government) were transported to the death camps. Arendt had seen that there was no safety in the ‘conservative’ option of staying put in the place decreed by officialdom, although it was understandable why so many did so, as it was at least a place to stay, one where many inmates thought they would be traced by their husbands and other family members.

Arendt took her distrust of the bureaucratic state further: she declined to obey the police by registering with the authorities as a Jew in the autumn of 1940. This meant that she, along with those others prepared to disobey orders, was not rounded up after supplying an address on the registration form. There were more narrow escapes but in 1941 Arendt and Blucher were able to obtain visas for the USA. The difficulties of obtaining French exit permits, as well as the agreement by Vichy to hand over all Germans to the Nazis meant that many others were not so lucky. Those who placed their trust in the French government in the belief that they would not be extradited were handed over to the Germans – and in many cases executed.

³⁰ Letter to ‘Midstream Magazine’ in 1962, cited in E. Young-Bruehl, 2004, p. 155

³¹ Ibid. p. 155.

Arendt told these stories when she wanted to stress the danger that lies in ‘misplaced confidence and refusal to act’.³² We might add to this the thought that Arendt here was displaying her characteristic penchant for independent thought, *thinking against*, the willingness mentally to detach oneself from what everyone else is doing which, as we shall see, she regarded as the indispensable precondition for judgment.

In the USA Arendt continued to write and eventually gained a job in academe. This was the period in which she produced the books that, before 1963, gave her what fame she had: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), *On Revolution*, (1963). These books constitute a long inquiry into a set of linked issues, and were the means by which Arendt developed a language with which to think about and interpret what had happened in modernity. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (original title: *The Burden of Our Times*) grew out of, among other things, Arendt’s experiences in Germany and France. It was there, according to her biographer, that she first conceived of the project of writing about the long prelude to the disasters of the mid century – the anti-semitism, nationalism and imperialism of the 19th century, as well as the new forces abroad in the world, Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, with their attempt to squeeze difference and plurality from the social life. With *The Human Condition* Arendt considers the conditions under which people live together – labouring, working and acting; in *On Revolution* she discusses the meaning of the American and French revolutions as occasions in which the attempt to make things anew either fail, (France) or for a time succeed, (USA). Just what the revolutionaries were doing, what they thought they were making, and what kind of (temporary) success attended their efforts is the subject of these books, and will be considered in a later chapter of the present work.

³² Ibid. p. 160.

In 1961 Arendt had the chance to go to Jerusalem for the *New Yorker* to cover the Eichmann trial. She had some personal experience of Nazi rule as well as years of meditation on the conditions under which men and women think and act politically. What she concluded has already been alluded to: there had been a kind of general moral collapse.³³ What is remarkable is that she began to consider the ways in which thinking, judging and acting might help to avoid a recurrence.

A large part of Arendt's work can be seen as an attempt to understand the nature of this 'moral collapse', to explore its meanings and consequences for post-war world (and not just that of 'respectable European society'). Despite one and a half millennia of Christian moral teaching, of an 'enlightenment', of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, a sophisticated nation at the heart of European civilisation had elected a man and a party dedicated to the most extreme acts of barbarity. And most shocking of all, he had found his way made smooth by the willing acquiescence of 'respectable European society'. This was the collapse and it prompted her (and many others) to raise questions about what happened to the society in which such things had become possible.

One of the most prominent figures in that history, and a key figure in the enlightenment of the modern period, was mentioned by the accused himself: Kant. During the police examination preceding the trial Eichmann

suddenly declared with great emphasis that he had lived his whole life according to Kant's moral precepts, and especially according to a Kantian definition of duty. This was outrageous, on the face of it, since Kant's moral philosophy is so closely bound up with man's faculty of Judgment, which rules out blind obedience.³⁴

³³ For an account of some of the connections between Arendt's views on that moral collapse ('dark times') in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the Eichmann trial, see S. Whitfield's *Into The Dark* 1980 *passim*.

³⁴ Arendt, 1968 pp. 135-6.

Eichmann was able to give an 'approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative':

'..the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general laws' (which is not the case with theft or murder, for instance, because the thief or murderer cannot conceivably wish to live under a legal system which would give others the right to rob or murder him). Upon further questioning he claimed he had read Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. He then proceeded to explain that from the moment he was charged with carrying out the Final Solution he had ceased to live under Kantian principles, that he had known it, and that he had consoled himself with the thought that he no longer 'was master of his own deeds', that he was unable 'to change anything'. What he failed to point out in court was that in this 'period of crimes legalised by the state', as he himself now called it, he had not simply dismissed the Kantian formula as no longer applicable, he had distorted it to read [in Hans Frank's formulation of 'the Categorical Imperative in the Third Reich']... "Act in such a way that the Fuhrer, if he knew your action, would approve it".³⁵

Kant, of course, meant for each person to legislate when he acted, using practical reason to find the principles that should be the principles of law. Everyone is a legislator for themselves and others when they act. When Eichmann said he had ceased to live according to Kantian principles he seems to have meant that autonomy was impossible for the 'little man' in the Third Reich: he was no longer 'master of his own deeds'; he was unable 'to change anything'. No doubt this is a common experience for the little man in totalitarian regimes. But Arendt's point is that he did not cease to be an agent: he *acted* in a way that distorted the Kantian imperative. We are used to the sense of inner estrangement that the citizen in such a regime may experience; a sense that one must go through the motions, whatever one's 'inner beliefs'. Of course, provided that one *does* go through the motions, which is usually enough for the regime. Silent remorse or personal repulsion costs nothing. Ideology requires that one act *as if* certain things were so; in this sense belief is objective, and not something merely in the head of the citizens. As Pascal comments, act as if something were true, whatever one's misgivings, and the inner feeling of rightness will follow later. But if this is so, then why not convict the entire German

³⁵ Ibid. p. 136.

people, minus a few resisters, of complicity in mass murder? If the regime demands that one acts in certain ways then all of the 'little men' and women are responsible. Why hang Eichmann alone? Arendt had little time for the doctrine of 'collective guilt'.³⁶ As she remarked 'where all are guilty, none is'. What was special about Eichmann - apart from the fact that he was available to the court, and a host of others were not - was the zeal with which this bureaucrat went about his business, and the egregious nature of the role he played in genocide.

Arendt seems to be suggesting a kind of 'transference' on the part of Eichmann, from the Moral Law to the *Fuhrer*. Here, Eichmann has substituted obedience to a legislator (Hitler) for the dictates of practical reason. Indeed, he has gone as far as identifying his will *with* that of the Legislator. Arendt describes Eichmann's 'unconscious distortion' of Kant, the way in which the Kantian categorical imperative became scaled down into a version 'for the household use of the little man' - a version requiring the self-identification of the little man with the Reich's decrees, whatever they might be. The evidence that this was more than passivity, fatalism and unwilling obedience lies with what he did, and the way he did it. For Eichmann, as a conscientious follower of such an imperative there could be *no exceptions*, whatever Herr Kastner or others might plead, whatever, indeed his own inclinations might be, whichever of his own superiors might command him in the last days of the war. Himmler might regard surviving Jews as bargaining counters - not Eichmann. Duty was duty.³⁷

Here we see the refusal to think as a mark of the 'banality of evil', a failing that is quite different from mere stupidity³⁸. Eichmann is failing to meet the absolute precondition for the moral life, which is to think for oneself. He is 'just following orders'. The events of the twentieth century – totalitarianism, racism, world war, genocide - mark, for Arendt, a unique

³⁶ See Bradshaw, 1989 p. 65 on Arendt's rejection of the 'there is an Eichmann in everyone of us' line.

³⁷ Žižek points out that Eichmann's way of invoking Kantian duty as an excuse is itself the evasion of moral autonomy that lay at the heart of the Categorical Imperative. See Žižek, 2007, p. XXV.

³⁸ And see Clarke, 1980, *passim*, on this point.

crisis in the morality of the west. This is a crisis with a blank in the middle of it – no thought, the absence of meaning. We shall see that Arendt connects this thoughtlessness to the atrophy of the faculty of judgment.³⁹ Indeed, for her, all the old categories, ways and modes of the past are in question and must be re-examined. This includes our conception of what it is to labour, to make, and to act as well as think and judge. The trail may begin with a bespectacled bureaucrat in the dock of a 1961 court but does not end there. For Arendt the question of why Eichmann did not think or judge is important because of the train of thought it sets in motion: perhaps the blankness in Eichmann stands for a void in the wider culture of modernity.

Eichmann's introduction of a distorted version of Kant's categorical imperative into the courtroom is a notable moment in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, if not in the court of 1961. Arendt is fascinated by the unlikely irruption. Kant was to become increasingly important to Arendt after 1962 and one might speculate on Eichmann's responsibility for bringing him to her attention in this context. Interestingly, it is the apparent *insufficiency* of Kant's moral philosophy that is most evident here. 'Kant' seems to stand for the failure of a whole tradition in the face of genocide. Yet Kant was to bulk large in her later work. To answer this it would be helpful to turn to Kant's ideas and examine them in more detail.

Kant's Categorical Imperative has at its heart the idea that one must act according to that maxim one could will for all other rational beings. Another well-known formulation of the Categorical Imperative has it that one must treat oneself and others not as means to an end, but as ends in themselves. In other words, one must approach others with a kind of respect: they, too, as rational beings, have a right to equal consideration with oneself, and as such must not be treated as anything less than morally equivalent to oneself. This rules out treating them as ways to get what one wants, or as mere vehicles for one's own ends. The effect of this is a kind of

³⁹ See Serena Parekh's attempt to connect conscience with the public, plural experience of reflective judgment (thus avoiding the merely arbitrary and 'subjective' nature of purely private conscience). Parekh, 2008, pp. 150-163.

moral democracy, republic of morality or 'kingdom of ends', where each is both legislator and subject to the same laws. By handing over the role of legislator to another, one not only utterly distorts the meaning of the first version of the Categorical Imperative, but also renders the second formulation nugatory: for if the will of another legislates for oneself, then the republic of democracy has become an autocracy, in which one Legislator may dispose of the lives and property of the subjects in whatever way he pleases. The 'little man' becomes the means by which the Legislator effects his will as Law.

One can take the view that the Nazi distortions of the Kantian morality leave the latter essentially untouched; that their criminality here is all of a piece with their repudiation of all other norms of decent behaviour. That decency is flouted surely condemns the transgressor rather than the norms. Yet things may not be so simple. Kantian morality was supposed to crystallise the rational essence of all morality, to express the rational kernel of all genuinely moral codes - the Golden Rule expressed in terms of Practical Reason. This is the manner in which the human subject is able to act freely, for it is only when we act as rational beings - that is, consistently and universally - that we transcend our nature as mere animals, as creatures ruled by appetite and aversion.

There is a possible - supposedly 'Hegelian' - objection to this account, that it specifies what the form of a moral action must be (according to a maxim that one can will as universal law), but not *what* the content of our willing ought to be. This is connected, arguably, to the emphasis on Reason as an utterly transcendent and ahistorical kernel to morality. Yet genuine moral judgments always presuppose a concrete historical context, a time and a place in history. So if I must not steal because I cannot consistently will the maxim 'take what belongs to others if you desire it' to be a universal law for all rational beings like myself, then I have presupposed the existence of private property as a principle of social life. But private property as we

understand it is a feature of a period in history, a specific set of social arrangements, a culture that is the effect of centuries of development. Property, contracts, taxes, wealth and poverty and a capitalist economic system provide the context in which the moral Judgment about stealing occurs. Against this, one might point out that this formal indeterminacy is a strength of Kant's account: the subject must *take responsibility* in 'converting' the abstract imperative of the Law into concrete ethical obligations⁴⁰. A 'Hegelian' criticism of Kant (or of some 'Kantian' readings) that is closer to the mark is that the categorical imperative should not be understood as an 'abstract testing device'⁴¹ for ascertaining whether or not a determinate moral norm is ethical or not. The view here would be that one should be ready to challenge one's context, *break* with the deliverances of the Tradition - not merely follow the norms erected by previous generations. The laws are merely the precipitate of the judgments of others.⁴² Another objection is to the effect that Kant has not said enough about *why* we should be moral. Like the climber who tackles the mountain 'because it is there' Kant seems to imagine the claims of reason as reason enough. Kant has stripped away all consideration of the point of morality as anything beyond the dutiful performance of duty. How we may feel is irrelevant, as are what we might want or what end might be achieved. Again, the chilly demand of the Moral Law has been abstracted from actually existing historical people in real contexts.

All this seems a long way from Eichmann in his courtroom in 1961. But what Arendt was observing was something quite removed from the academic critique of the Categorical Imperative. What she saw - or thought she saw - was the effect of a catastrophe, a crisis that had engulfed the received structures of morality, reason and decency; a crisis for that notion of enlightenment and moral progress for which Kant is an illustrious representative. The sense that something had happened to the received structures, a kind of movement in the tectonic plates,

⁴⁰ The reverse, clearly, of Eichmann's intention when he invoked Kant. See p.29

⁴¹ Žižek, 1991 pp. 221-222.

⁴² See Žižek, 1991 pp. 221-225, for a discussion of this view in relation to a discussion of Kant, Hegel and Arendt.

is not confined to Arendt, of course, and it does not begin in 1961, or even 1945. The critique of those structures, of that confidence, has a history of its own. But after 1945 one of its names was ‘existentialism’. In many ways, I want to argue, Arendt’s presentation of Eichmann appears as a kind of parallel, or even grim parody, of the kind of example that the French existentialists might put forward - that of the man who must choose, must act and in so acting, choose himself. Of course Eichmann stands as a failure here, in those terms: the man who passes responsibility for what he does to a ‘higher authority’.⁴³

Sartre’s account in *Existentialism and Humanism*, of the young man who comes to him for advice is well known, but may bear a brief recounting here. Sartre recounts the (he says true) story of a man, one of his students, who, when France falls in 1940 has a dilemma. Should he leave the country to join the Free French forces or stay with his widowed mother? Either course can be represented as the right thing to do. The commandments of the Christian religion are no help in making the decision - love thy neighbour leaves it quite undecided who is the neighbour here: one’s family or one’s fellow patriots. And if the Kantian approach is to be recommended then it remains unclear how ‘act according to that maxim which you could will as a universal law’ applies here. The maxim ‘protect your mother’ or ‘loyally defend your country’ could both be contenders. This kind of problem comes with any appeal to morality-as-following-duty: the human subject must interpret how the rule, commandment or duty is to be applied in a particular case. We see that the application of any moral rule involves judgment.

⁴³ For an account of Arendt’s existentialism, but from the perspective of the influence of Jaspers and *existenz* philosophy, see Hinchman and Hinchman 1994, pp. 143-179. Margaret Canovan discusses (too) briefly the ‘existentialist’ aspect to Arendt in pp. 189 -190 of her book. She correctly identifies this as the conviction that we are ‘flung into a howling wilderness’ – and cites the usual forebears of Nietzsche, Heidegger et. al.. She goes on to make the point that if this is true, then we must add that Arendt’s thought is ‘existentialism politicised’ (L.P and S.K Hinchman’s phrase, cited by Canovan). It is politicised by two ‘linked convictions’: (1) that we are plural and not solitary, and that (2) we have the capacity to act together to build and defend structures to house human beings on the earth (i.e. make a shared world). This is correct, and goes to the heart of Arendt’s work. I would only add here the thought that from the perspective of judgment, Arendt’s is a kind of political *phenomenology*: we disclose who we are, we ‘show up’ for each other, in a bounded *topos* (a public space). See Canovan, 1992 pp. 189-190. See Bergen 1998 *passim*, for more on the issue of Eichmann’s failure to think, Arendt and the ‘final solution.’

And so the young man comes to his professor for advice. But as Sartre points out, we tend to go to the person whose advice we are already disposed to take. In any case, the responsibility to take advice, to listen to another and follow their advice, is still one's own. One cannot escape responsibility that goes with choosing to act.

Sartre was trying to illustrate his thesis that one's free choices, how one acts, are in effect choices about who one will be, since, for him, only the free actions of the individual count. There is no pre-existing essence ('existence before essence'). There are several possible retorts to this. One would be to point out that Sartre is telling us something we should know already: that any criterion of morality is liable to generate 'ties' or undecidable dilemmas - situations in which two or more possible options seem equally desirable, or undesirable. But Sartre seems to be getting at something else. His presentation of the young man's dilemma is intended to go beyond the 'normal' dilemmas of morality. It is not that, given a criterion for moral action (Kantian, Christian or Utilitarian, say), we can have a dilemma, so much is obvious, but that in the end all choices are radically underdetermined by the facts of the matter.⁴⁴ So much so, in fact, that the choice one makes can only be a *radically free choice*. In other words, a choice of the kind the young man will make can neither be justified nor condemned by any criterion beyond that of the will of the chooser. 'Justification' looks out of place here, if there is no criterion at all for a 'right' choice - only a *radical* one. If so we can criticise him for not being radical enough here. For he presents the young man as having only two choices - fight for France or stay with his mother. But why not just run away? or even join the Nazis or their Vichy representatives? Plenty did. Sartre's reason for ruling out the last alternative - being a Nazi - seems to take him back to a version of Kantianism that few have found convincing (respecting the freedom of

⁴⁴ See Jay, 1978. Jay claims that Arendt has an affinity to the political existentialists of the pre-war years. His argument –that she was some kind of aestheticising 'decisionist', seems to me misconceived. His argument has similarities with the view of Kateb, and shares some of the same misconceptions. Arendt was not, as I try to show, trying to aestheticise politics, and her political existentialism, if such it is, is quite different to the one presented by Jay and Kateb. Kateb's essay is in Beiner & Nedelsky, 2001.

others as one respects it in oneself). The effect of placing everything on the unencumbered free choice of the individual leads to a pure voluntarism that has no reason beyond the will itself for its choices. Why accept a law beyond the will, if the will can be a law for itself? After all, if choice really is as radical as Sartre here seems to think it is, what possible criteria could count as decisive for the Judgment on how one should act?

Arendt finds the beginning of an answer in Kant. For Kant, morality is about the self-regulation of Reason, the demand that one should be consistent. We saw that its formal, apparently ahistorical character, its supposed disconnection from motivation and feeling has been thought to be a problem. But there is a more profound issue at stake here, one arguably arising out of the historical experience of the Twentieth Century. It is the collapse of the conception of morality as law. It is one thing to criticise Kantian morality on the grounds of its failure to embed a conception of morality in the context of history and culture; that can be seen as an ‘academic’ problem. For Arendt and Sartre, the question is already existential and urgent, and is posed by the actual turn of history in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries.⁴⁵ History has seen the moral code tested, and found wanting, in an immediate and pressing way. Eichmann and ‘the young man’ stand as emblems of a collapse of confidence in the capacity of a tradition to provide the framework within which moral and political judgments can be made by the ‘little man’.⁴⁶ Again, it is as if the questions posed by Nietzsche have taken on a concrete *political* form. Hegel had argued that Kant’s conception of morality was ungrounded in the processes of history and the development of real communities. Both were self-consciously heirs to the enlightenment. But the experience of imperialism, racism, nationalism and world war has been to put the very enlightenment in doubt - a ‘Nietzsche crisis’. Real historical events had led to a kind of break with the assumptions of the past. For Arendt, a kind of ‘thinking without

⁴⁵ See Fine, 2001, p. 162: ‘The call of modern philosophy is to understand a world which now knows Auschwitz and the Gulag.’

⁴⁶ See Parvikko, 2008, chapter 5, for a discussion of Arendt’s view of the broader context in which Eichmann was a negative exemplar. Parvikko is particularly alert to Arendt’s use of irony.

banisters' was now possible and urgently necessary. Her interest in thinking and judging, and her return to Kant, relate to this, the core of the crisis of modernity. For Arendt, this would mean getting clear about what thinking and judging is, how the former makes the latter possible.

Thinking, for Arendt, is not only the process by which one applies intelligence to problem-solving, finding the means to bring about certain ends, etc. Eichmann could do *that*. Arendt follows Kant and Heidegger in seeing thinking as the freer activity of the mind⁴⁷. To think one must withdraw from the sensuous, immediate, and everyday world. In imagination one 'travels', comparing and contrasting, abstracting from that which is present to bring to the mind that which is absent. Above all, it is to involve oneself in grasping the *meaning* of things, not their mere factuality or absence. It presupposes a use of the imagination, putting oneself into the shoes of others. So thinking, in sending one off on travels of the imagination, works both to cut one off from the world (that immediate world of people and things which need one's attention) and put oneself in touch with something wider: the world of possible others, of a plurality of points of view. This faculty is the indispensable condition for judgment, as we shall see: As thinking connects us to others, judgment *discloses* who we are to them. This is an essentially *political* view of judgment, if we understand politics as the art or science of living with others in some kind of shared space. For Arendt, the political is the sharing of a *topos* with others. Following Aristotle, Arendt identifies the power of speech as crucial in identifying the nature of the political. For Arendt, as we shall see, the political is the realm of *doxa*, not *logos*; of uncoerced opinion, not final and binding Truth. This is where multiple points of view or perspectives share a space; where, uncoerced, individuals reveal who they are to others, through speech.⁴⁸ The 'I' is one among others, one of a plurality; one's thinking is revealed through the

⁴⁷ But see ST Leonard for a critique of this view of thinking, in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997 pp. 323-337.

⁴⁸ Serena Parekh argues that the experience of 'ungroundedness' for our judgments, as well as the retreat from a shared world (the kind of worldlessness that ensues when people retreat into their private interests and ultimately the privacy their own minds) are the key issues for the way Arendt was to approach the problem of Human Rights in the post-war world. She makes a persuasive case for Arendt's 'phenomenology of human rights'. See Parekh, S, 2008, *passim*.

judgments one make with others.⁴⁹ This is emphatically not the context for the technical or instrumental use of the intellect, but of thinking, *reflective* judgment and speech. It is in this sense the Eichmann was thoughtless, and thus could not judge for himself when the time came.

Arendt came increasingly to see the problem as one of judgment. And so she came to reconsider the character of that faculty. This led her back to Kant - not the Kant of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, of the categorical imperative, but the Kant of the *Critique of Judgment*. For the problem that Eichmann posed was of an abdication of judgment, and of the responsibility to think for oneself. This has happened in a context of a general collapse of lawfulness. - A situation when the individual seems to be thrown back on his or her own resources. Yet as we have seen, Eichmann was 'thoughtless' and Arendt came to see that this thoughtlessness was connected to a political and public problem, rather than one that was purely individual and moral⁵⁰. What was it in Kant's 3rd Critique that seemed relevant to Arendt?

For Kant, judgment has two aspects: determinant and reflective. In determinant judgment one has a rule, a concept or category that one applies to a particular instance. To give an overly simple example: I have the concept of a saucer (round, made of china, has a circular indent for a cup, etc.); I encounter a particular thing that 'falls under' my concept of a saucer and I make the judgment: this thing here is a saucer. Two things about this kind of judgment are worth remarking on immediately. One is the coercive nature of the judgment. If the particular fits the concept, then it is a saucer - a correct judgment must be that this is a saucer, and all competent judges will have to agree it is a saucer, not an umbrella or a computer. There is something automatic in our experience of this aspect of judgment, as if one were immediately following orders. The understanding legislates - it gives the rule for correct judgment of a

⁴⁹ See Curtis, 'The Aesthetic Foundations of Democratic Politics in the Work of Hannah Arendt' in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997 for a good account of this self-with-others point, *passim*, but especially pp. 44-47.

⁵⁰ For the sense in which Eichmann was unwilling to exercise the faculty of judgment see Clarke, 1980, *passim*. Clarke sees moral failure (a failure to will) as making Eichmann a useful tool of the regime.

particular.

The other form of judgment is somewhat mysterious - it is the way in which the particular comes to be presented to the understanding, and a correct 'fit' achieved between the concept (saucer) and that thing in front of me (which I recognise as a saucer). Something must be bringing them together - and for Kant this is the imagination, here acting as the 'handmaiden' of the understanding. How we come to do this, and how it is that our faculties have the ability to carve the world up in this way is a deep question, and a mystery, which we shall return to later. It is enough for now to think of determinant judgment as a kind of logical judgment – a 'downward' move as it were, from the concept to the particular: 'the concept saucer applies to this x'.

Kant calls the other aspect of judgment *reflective*. Here we make a judgment for which there is no pre-existing rule or concept. We confront a particular for which there is no rule, no pre-existing classifying concept. The classic focus for this kind of judgment in Kant is aesthetic judgment where the judge must fall back, not on a classifying concept, but on her own experience, say in the presence of beauty. An aesthetic judgment cannot demand that all other competent judges agree on a judgment of beauty, as they must with 'this is a saucer'. The judge must appeal to, but cannot coerce, the others in the judgment that this is beautiful. The hope is that they will agree; the possibility is that they may not.⁵¹ It was this kind of judgment that Arendt was to turn to, seeing it as an important possibility for political judgment as a kind of free, uncoerced yet not chaotic judgment.⁵² Importantly it is a view of judgment that assumes the presence of others.

⁵¹ It is important not to miss the 'they may not' –the possibility of dissensus –if judgment is to be true to aesthetics and politics. This seems to be a mistake Serena Parekh is close to making –see Parekh, S 2008, p. 84. She seems to correct herself later, see p. 87.

⁵² See Lara, 2007 pp. 9-13 for an account of the political/historical role of reflective judgment (reference is made to Arendt's work in making reflective judgments in a political/historical context).

If we return to Sartre's young man, we see his problem in terms of judgment: the imagination has presented two (or more) possible particulars. Which is right? Fight the Nazis or protect your mother? (Or, the further possibilities of joining the Nazis etc.). Sartre argues that there is no one right answer. The young man will have to decide, to choose, and thus to choose himself. Neither the injunctions of Christianity (love thy neighbour...etc.) nor the Kantian demand that one universalise the maxim behind one's action will produce a determinate decision. If we think of the dilemma as a problem for judgment we can reconfigure it as a problem for *reflective* judgment: the judgment that cannot start from a rule or formula. Now these problems for Kantians of clashing duties are not new and, like the criticisms of Hegel, precede 1940. Yet there has been a change.

Again, the change is one that occurs outside the academy, a kind of shift in the tectonic plates of bourgeois normality, amounting to an earthquake by 1945. It amounts to a genuine crisis when the question: how are we to judge? is met with silence⁵³. The criteria of judgment - the correct application of the rules of judgment, whether crystallised in Christian or Kantian forms - are no longer thought to be credible. The rules of bourgeois society become visible as lacking credibility in a stark and unmissable way by 1945. Sartre and Arendt, in their different ways, are both posing the question that had become urgent by the time of the mid-century collapse in standards of judgment, decency and morality.

They have different answers to the question, indeed they pose the question in very different ways, but there are some similarities.⁵⁴ For Sartre in 1947 the individual must grasp the

⁵³ Michael Denneny describes the crux as the 'essential crisis of our epoch.' See Denneny, 'The Privilege of Ourselves: Hannah Arendt of Judgment' in Williams, 2006, p. 203.

⁵⁴ The similarities have not been as often remarked on as they might be. When Arendt and Sartre are considered together, it is usually to contrast them. See TR Flynn, 'An End to Authority' pp. 64-5 in McBride 1997, for instance: a superficial comment that Sartre was 'against' authority and Arendt 'for' it.

fact of his ‘abandonment’ when situated as a ‘radical chooser’⁵⁵ (in Charles Taylor’s phrase): for Sartre, the individual must choose, under conditions which radically underdetermine what kind of action would be right or fitting. Sartre’s young man chooses, and in choosing, chooses himself, like an artist, creating a result that he cannot be fully clear about before he creates. So making a moral choice, as Sartre says in *Existentialism and Humanism*, is like being an artist. The problem is that Sartre has suppressed an essential moment in judgment – the presence of others.

What stands out here is Sartre’s voluntarism, for the choice seems to lie entirely in the will of the chooser - one chooses X as good, and X is good only insofar as one chooses it. But what can such a claim mean? If x is only good because I will it, then this amounts to saying, x is not independently good at all. But this makes the choice arbitrary. It really would seem to be all the same whether he chooses to stay, go, join the Nazis or lie down in a darkened room. Yet it is clear that Sartre *does* think some choices are better than others. And this should not surprise us, as no one has ever faced choices utterly devoid of any pre-existing commitments or ideas about what is independently good or right as Sartre suggests here. In *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre tries to persuade us that it is freedom itself that the chooser must respect, in him and in others, which would, it seems, rule out the ‘be a Nazi’ option. Yet this return to a kind of Categorical Imperative of pure freedom in Sartre is unconvincing: freedom itself is elevated as a kind of core characteristic in the human condition that all must respect in each. Yet if I really am as free as Sartre earlier claims, why should I not respect my own freedom to enslave others? There seems no reason to leave the golden rule untouched as the other idols of the tribe are subjected to the hammer.

If we return to ‘Arendt’s Eichmann’ we see the situation as different and similar.

⁵⁵ See ‘What is Human Agency?’ in Taylor, 1985 p.29, in the context of a critique of the Sartrean model of choice in *Existentialism and Humanism*.

Eichmann, if we take him at his word, has substituted the Fuhrer's will for his own judgment.⁵⁶ He has fallen at the first hurdle, as he is not autonomous. In Sartrean terms, he is in bad faith - denying the fact of his freedom to choose. If we think of him in terms of Kantian categories of judgment, he is treating the rules, decrees and will of the 3rd Reich as the rules under which to subsume the particulars when he judges. If the voluntarism of Sartre's young man example represents one unsatisfactory answer to the problem of judgment, this is another. The former eschews rules in a kind of aesthetic free play (the judge as artist, with no one and nothing to constrain him); the latter bureaucratises it as a kind of determinant judgment.

The problem of judgment emerging in the modern age is this. What are the rules, the criteria for a judgment, if the codes, laws and rules of religion and bourgeois convention have been exposed as incredible, as arbitrary themselves? The promise of enlightenment had been one of achieving maturity, founded on the notion that the individual could think for herself, and not need guidance from priest or prince. For Kant, this would mean the public use of reason, as the possession of all rational beings. Reason has its demand for consistency, impersonality and universality. Yet as we noted, this misses the problem for a would-be liberated rational citizen: what should the rational judge choose? The criteria cannot be found in a glacial categorical imperative. Judgment finds itself critically short of criteria, of good reasons. The options seem to be judgment as arbitrary free play (Sartre), or enslavement to the Will of the Other (Eichmann).

Eichmann was a thoughtless man. But how did he come to be thoughtless? What was he not thinking about? Demanding that Eichmann be 'authentic' is hollow, if the demand is that he be more aware of the lack of sanction for his acts. For *any* acts might then follow. Eichmann stands as a type, a function of a bureaucratic-terrorist state not because he was insufficiently

⁵⁶ For Clarke and Bradshaw he is unwilling to employ his faculties: he doesn't lack ability; he chooses not to exercise it. See Bradshaw, 1989 p. 94-96 and Clarke, 1980 p. 437.

aware of his 'abandonment' but because he (along with millions of others) had lost his place in a world of others. Thinking and judging depend on a world of others, in both thought and fact⁵⁷. They are not possible for the kind of efficient monad Eichmann had become by 1945.⁵⁸

As Nietzsche foresaw, this is no mere academic philosophical problem: it is an event in history, the collapse of the Law.⁵⁹ Social, political and cultural change had exposed a certain conception of morality for what it had always been: the elevation of consistency, of a conception of reason above all the other conditions necessary for a moral life. However unfairly, this view has been often labelled 'Kantian.'⁶⁰ Politics killed this morality. Much of Arendt's writing is devoted to tracing what happened - the fate of modernity, or of the enlightenment. The "Kantian" version of morality and its religious and secular antecedents were vulnerable to the objections of the academy, but what really stimulated Arendt and Sartre were the political and cultural changes that had made it impossible to continue in the old way of the golden rule, the categorical imperative or the norms of unreflective bourgeois decency, however attractive they might seem. After the deluge, after 1914-1945 in particular, one was left looking back across a kind of abyss to a previous landscape⁶¹. Arendt's value as a commentator lies in part in her appreciation of the fact of a crisis and her willingness to explore the route by which the crisis had come upon 'Western' or North Atlantic civilisation. Partly, it is as if history had proved Hegel right in his judgment of Kantian morality, but there was more than this.

⁵⁷ C.f. MW Jackson: 'The Responsibility of Judgment and the Judgment of Responsibility' for an overview of the issues involved in thinking and judging (collected in Kaplan & Kessler, 1989).

⁵⁸ Dana Villa makes the point that Arendt's controversial assessment of Eichmann's banality etc, and her courage in publishing her views, was itself an exemplary reflective judgment. See Villa, 1999 pp. 103-106.

⁵⁹ Robert Dostal argues that there is in Arendt a 'quite un-Kantian' rejection of a 'moral law internal to the will; there is only the abyss of freedom'. This is part of his larger argument that Arendt has deformed Kant in her appropriation of aesthetic reflective judgment etc. But Arendt has moved in this direction not because she cannot read Kant properly, but rather because of the pressure of the historical catastrophe that is the early Twentieth Century. The 'abyss of freedom' is the crisis that is also an opportunity to 'think without banisters'. See Dostal, 'Judging Human Action' in Beiner & Nedelsky, p. 142.

⁶⁰ There is more to Kant's conception of morality than the mere application of an ahistorical principle of rational consistency, but the interpretation that sees no more than this in it has become part of its historical fate.

⁶¹ But see Drusilla Cornell 'Thinking Big in Dark Times', for an attempt to think beyond the problem of the collapse of traditional morality. In Berkowitz et. al., 2010 pp. 222-227.

Behind the ethical day of Bourgeois-Christian morality lay darkness: imperialism, anti-Semitism and nationalism. They had developed together. And this was to threaten both the liberal institutions of the democracies and doom the peoples of central and Eastern Europe to a tyranny and genocide that had been long preparing far from the metropolitan centres of Europe.⁶² To produce a narrative, recounting the advent of a crisis of this kind is not an optional extra, it is, I take it, an essential part of the process of understanding what judgment has become.

The other side of Arendt's project, as it were, was to re-examine whatever resources were to hand in coming to understand and overcome the crisis, which, as she pointed out, is also a kind of opportunity - a chance to think unencumbered by the debris of the past. This kind of thinking does not preclude going back to the past to see what resources there may be that can help us. For Arendt, that meant looking at Kant again, but not in the usual place.

So Arendt returns to Kant's discussion of judgment in the Third Critique. When Arendt approaches the issue she brings to it a political dimension missing in Sartre.⁶³ Arendt is thinking here not of the lonely artist, making her creations anew, unencumbered by rule or precept, but more true to Kant's vision of the community of judges - a plurality of judges who see the world from different standpoints and thus, she will argue, safeguard its reality, a bounded intersubjectivity acting as a kind of *topos* necessary for full human discourse. Thus Arendt is a kind of political existentialist, or political phenomenologist. She emphasises the creative dimension of action and judgment in the production of the 'New', the truly unprecedented in human affairs; she also stresses the disclosive character of judgment and action, the way in

⁶² See Hansen, 1993 chapter 4 *passim* on bourgeois complicity in the germination of totalitarianism.

⁶³ For an account that compares Arendt with a contemporary and sometime colleague of Sartre see Isaac, J. *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion* 1992, *passim*. The author sees Arendt and Camus as rebels, and as antifoundationalist critics of modernity, trying to pursue a political radicalism in the wake of the disasters and disillusionments of the mid-twentieth century.

which meaning is only possible for us in a bounded space in which we appear with others. What marks her out from Sartre et al is her firm grasp of the necessity of multiple standpoints for there to be meaning, and not just facts on which individuals project their fantasies and desires.

Arendt's importance here is the way she returns us to the political, to *doxa*, the realm of judgment. Arendt's grasp of politics centres on its anti-theological nature: it is not the *topos* of the enlightened one, the Platonic philosopher establishing the rule of *logos*, the One, Being. For Arendt the *topos* of the political, the bounded space that is the arena for action and judgment, remains always open to the many, not the one. Genuine politics cannot thrive where the priest and the scientist, the expert and the 'engineer of human souls' dictate the Truth; politics remains the domain of the provisional, of the search for what lies between us (*inter est*) - reflective, not determinate judgment. Her contribution is her demand that we see the political space as the ecology in which meaning itself emerges in history⁶⁴

Arendt's political phenomenology is not unproblematic. It has some significant lacunae, which occur as effects of her characteristic approach to thinking about politics and appearance. Her tropes are mainly visual and spatial: people and things have to appear, in order to be meaningful, or even real. This emphasis on seeing and acting has no 'unconscious' - all the action happens in the day, available for the actors and judges to grasp; being and seeming are one: there is no attempt to engage with Freud or psychoanalysis, to seek what might lie behind the avowed and the enacted. More surprising, perhaps, is the absence of Hegel, given the phenomenological slant to her work. This is the result of a clear decision on her part to be 'a phenomenologist, but not in the same way as Hegel': there is no 'cunning of reason' in her

⁶⁴ For the influence of Jaspers on the meaning/truth distinction see Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994, p. 163. Meaning arises when human beings develop a narrative –and this always transcends the mere assemblage of facts. See Dana Villa on the way in which judgment emerges as crucial for a politics that is neither the servant of theoretical reason nor the *logos* of the philosopher: Villa, 1999, chapter 4, 'Thinking and Judging', esp. pp. 98-103.

account of what happens in history.⁶⁵ And there is something distinctly heroic and 'masculine' in her account. As Marxists and feminists have noted, the workplace and the *oikos* - the home, the place of labour for food, of the production and rearing of the new generation, is present but marginalised in her account of the political. Paradoxically, politics is what happens when we are *not* demanding social change, or a better distribution of resources.⁶⁶ Finally, her picture of the bounded space of politics can be criticised for its failure to really engage with the antagonism and dissensus that mark - or even erase - the political.

All these absences and silences are significant, and they make her work, in some ways, one-sided.⁶⁷ However, the contribution that Arendt does make to our understanding of what politics is, its relation to judgment, action and meaning and the way it now lies under threat is impressive and indispensable, as I hope to show in the following pages. Her political existentialism remains extremely apropos in the twenty-first century, in the 'society of the spectacle'.⁶⁸ Arendt's project involves a kind of politicisation of judgment. For her, the key to the recovery of 'decency' and a full human life post-1945 was connected to an honest attempt to understand what had happened and the corresponding struggle to grasp the essentials for the future - a publicly shared realm in which judgment can occur, because others can appear. The following pages attempt to track and assess this attempt.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Young-Bruehl, 2004 p. 405.

⁶⁶ If we distinguish the form of politics from its content, there is every reason to think that economic issues could be subject to political judgment and action. See Hinchman & Hinchman 'Existentialism Politicised' p. 160, in Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994. See too Benhabib 1996, chapter 5, *passim*, also chapter 6, esp. pp. 211-215, for a positive consideration of the ways in which Arendt's thought could provide a springboard for a feminist rethinking of the private sphere.

⁶⁷ One welcome effect of her unusual approach has been to make her hard to categorise. She seems to have radical, liberal and conservative strands in her thought, yet in the end to belong to no camp. Margaret Canovan stresses the tragic dimension to her view of human affairs as the truly distinguishing feature of her work: See 'Hannah Arendt as a Conservative Thinker' in May & Kohn, 1996, pp. 11-28.

⁶⁸ See Debord, 1992 *passim*.

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Minnich notes that Arendt sought to think *with* and not *as* or *about* the thinkers she sought to understand. ('To Judge in Freedom: Hannah Arendt on the Relation of Thinking and Morality' in Kaplan and Kessler, 1989, p. 135). I would add that we also need to think *against* such thinkers in order to genuinely engage with them.

Chapter 2

Hannah Arendt, 'Common Sense' and the Visibility of Judgment.

*I am a sort of phenomenologist, but not in Hegel's way - or Husserl's (Hannah Arendt)*⁷⁰

In this chapter we will follow Arendt's thinking on the capacity of 'ordinary people' to think and judge for themselves. An important stimulus for Arendt's thinking here is Kant, and so we will read her reading him on 'common sense' and judgment. I argue that Arendt's difficulties with these notions are not merely idiosyncratic but can be traced back to Kant's ambivalence about the people, conceived now as citizens, then as a multitude, then again as a mob, ready to be manipulated and gulled - in contrast to the enlightened possessors of 'taste' and sound judgment. Kant's discussion of the nature of taste and common sense in the *Critique of Judgment* goes well beyond its ostensible subject, the character of aesthetic judgment, and raises questions about a central aspect of the 'enlightenment project': the capacity of *all* 'the people' to judge freely. And this uncertainty, or ambivalence, continues to unsettle, for if the mass of the people cannot think for themselves and must be led by those who can, the promise of the enlightenment, that all citizens can become free through thinking for themselves - is compromised. My approach here will be to examine Kant's and Arendt's discussion of the nature of *judgment* in a close reading, for it is this unique faculty that I take to lie at the centre of the problem of autonomy.⁷¹ Although Arendt takes over Kant's doubts even as she adopts and adapts his ideas here, I argue that it is productive and plausible to read Arendt's work at its best

⁷⁰ Young-Bruehl, 2004, p. 405.

⁷¹ For an overview of Arendt on judgment, see Denny in Hill, 1979, pp. 245-271

as impelling us towards a notion of the political as the indispensable *topos* for the exercise of freedom for *all of the citizens*.

Thinking and Judging

We left Arendt in chapter 1 with the thought that the great catastrophe of totalitarianism and genocide was but the terrible illumination of a general collapse. A collapse in politics, judgment and ultimately even in thinking and meaning, with Eichmann as negative exemplar: the man who did not judge because he did not think. Yet Arendt sees, beyond necessary horror at the disaster, a kind of hope, or opportunity.⁷² It is as if the extent of the devastation wrought on the intellectual and cultural tradition of two millennia had created a moment in which one could rediscover those capacities to think anew, and to act, that had once been undervalued: we must ‘think without banisters’ in her famous phrase.⁷³ The source of hope lies in the human characteristic to begin anew, to create something new under the sun. It is this thought that took her to re-examine reflective judgment — the judgment that operates in the absence of rules and precedents, and which presupposes not the lonely thinker, but the plurality of perspectives, of standpoints, as truly valuable and characteristic of the human condition.

This is Arendt’s most vital contribution, in my view: a perspective on care for the world that unites a phenomenology with reflective judgment.⁷⁴ Phenomenology concerns that which appears or ‘shows up’ for us; reflective judgment is, as we shall see, a faculty that presupposes the presence of *others*.⁷⁵ So her sense of the world is imbued with an appreciation of the importance of plurality in thinking and appearing. But she is no less aware of the fragility of these fabrications: the walls, laws, constitutions and so forth that encircle and preserve plurality. Without these conditions, she will argue, genuine politics is impossible, humans cannot be free

⁷² For a more sceptical account of Arendt’s attempt to connect thinking, judgment and evil see Richard Bernstein, ‘The Banality of Evil Reconsidered’ in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997 pp. 297-318.

⁷³ But see Stephen T Leonard, in Calhoun and McGowan, 1997. Leonard argues, among other things, that Arendt never quite does this. See esp. pp. 331-335.

⁷⁴ But see Dana Villa for a different estimation of the role of judgment in relation to thinking and acting: Villa, 1992, Chapter 4 ‘Thinking and Judging’ pp. 87-106.

⁷⁵ See Curtis, 1999 *passim* and especially Chapter 1 pp. 17-22 on this point.

to truly act (as distinct from behave) and so the unique faculty of what she calls ‘natality’, the ability to bring something new into the world, is frustrated.

This is a profoundly anti theological, anti platonic vision. By this I mean that it places *doxa* above *logos*: the clash of opinion is valued above the One Truth of the philosopher or sage. Many philosophers in the tradition have held this ‘theological’ vision (the latest important representative may have been the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger) but from Arendt’s perspective, whatever their importance may be to philosophy, their error was to think they could be above or beyond the political and the ethical.⁷⁶ Phenomenology without reflective judgment is misguided and even irresponsible as it amounts to a failure to care for the multiple, incorrigibly plural world.

For Arendt, it is the essence of what she called ‘totalitarianism’ to, and here we employ one of her tropes, *squeeze* the interspaces between individuals, and thus eliminate the dimension of the political. The effect is to vitiate the power of individuals to come together to think, act and judge, replacing politics with terror, coercion and ‘administrative methods’. As we shall see, in her view the totalitarian experience is of the nature of an extreme and horrible version of a tendency detectable in the western democracies, too, where private interests come to obscure the common good of the public realm (cf. *The Human Condition*). Arendt is rightly quite clear that there are indispensable distinctions to be made between the Nazi and Stalinist regimes and the liberal-bourgeois democracies, but she does insist that in both the activity of the triad thinking-acting-judging has been ‘squeezed’ out of public life.

There is certainly an equivocation in Arendt’s considerations on the capacities of the modern inheritors of the enlightenment to think, judge and act. So much so we are almost

⁷⁶ For a different view on this see George Kateb’s interesting essay ‘The Judgment of Arendt’ in Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001. He argues that political judgment ‘in the right spirit’ for Arendt is essentially aesthetic and non-moral. In my view he reaches this conclusion by leaning too heavily on certain passages in *Between Past and Future* and in stressing her affinity to ancient Greek notions of judgment. This leads him into implausibilities in his account of what Arendt thought she was doing in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* – texts that are certainly concerned with judging and moral considerations.

justified in speaking of her two aspects or voices. One is radical and optimistic: it lauds revolutionaries (such as Thomas Jefferson and Rosa Luxemburg), workers councils, and the Paris Commune - examples of natality, of genuine political judgment and action. The other is more conservative and more pessimistic: it gives an account of modernity as loss, characterised by stupidity, consumerism and passivity. The question is one of the fate of the enlightenment, and it centres on the question of the freedom, or more precisely the autonomy of the citizen. Since the modern 'enlightened' citizen recognises no arbitrary other as the source of authority for her judgments, she must be prepared to take that authority on her own shoulders, along with her fellow citizens. But that requires a step towards thinking for oneself that Kant characterises in terms of maturity:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own understanding!⁷⁷

A few lines later, Kant remarks that laziness and cowardice are responsible for people remaining 'immature' — adding that it is thus easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. Kant then argues that what is needed is freedom in the public use of reason. The thought is that the public might gradually shake off its 'immaturity' and its guardians if the more enlightened would help the mass in incremental steps towards a greater confidence in the use of public reason, until guardians of all sorts are not needed.

There is thus a clear demand for autonomy that emerges: to think, and eventually act, for oneself. This kind of claim can be seen as the characteristic demand of modernity, or post-modernity — from John Stuart Mill to Richard Rorty. To take a relatively recent example: Heller and Feher's *The Postmodern Political Condition* enumerates five 'principles constitutive of a democratic politics' — moral maxims and political principles of freedom, justice, equality,

⁷⁷ "An answer to the Question 'What is Enlightenment?'" in Kant, 1991.

fairness and equity, and on the basis of these maxims formulate a 'basic law for democratic politics':

Act in a way, which allows all free and rational human beings to assent to the political principles of your actions⁷⁸

The assumption is that a *consensus omnium* is possible, not on all political decisions, but on the principles underpinning those decisions. This seems to be a principle that any would-be inheritor of the Enlightenment would subscribe to and it would certainly be a component in any 'left-progressive' set of guiding principles. But, of course, 'ought implies can': the citizen must be capable of thinking for herself. If we think she isn't able to think for herself adequately, much would depend on whether the constraints on genuine autonomy are permanent and constitutive of the way most people are, or somehow the result of social and historical conditions, and thus, in principle at least, capable of being transcended. As Kant hints, guardians have an interest in maintaining the immaturity of the masses. This takes us to the vexed question of 'common sense' in Arendt and Kant.

Common Sense⁷⁹

'Common sense' is a problematic term. In one sense it just means a kind of ordinary, normal understanding, without which one is foolish or mentally defective. There is a strong presumption therefore that it involves a capacity all may be expected to have. In thinking about politics, it is often opposed to ideology, as a kind of perversion of common sense.⁸⁰ With 'common sense' we are somehow supposed to use our pre-theoretical mental equipment in order to see things as they really are, with the task of the phenomenologist as that of clearing away the clutter in order to get back to that primal vision. As we shall see, Arendt is inclined to use it in just this way. Unfortunately, this sometimes causes her to miss the sense in which the idea of common sense is itself ideological. Ideology is surely an indispensable concept for

⁷⁸ Heller and Feher, 1988.

⁷⁹ For an illuminating discussion on the Kantian notion of common sense/*sensus communis* that makes reference to Arendt's use of the concept see Kleist, 2000, especially pp. 78-88 and ff.

⁸⁰ And this all too easily slides into an epithet for any thinking of which one strongly disapproves.

anyone who wants to challenge the ‘self images of the age’, and Arendt’s use of the term, as the label for the kind of closed-off thinking characteristic of totalitarian regimes and movements, is far too limited to be fully useful for her own project of ‘thinking what we are doing’ and represents one of the limits to her political phenomenology.

And this limit is important. It is a symptom of the very malaise that threatens any version of the ‘enlightenment project’ that would seek to build on the principles of political debate and representation that underlie the democratic project. Contempt for the governed goes with the very bureaucratisation of modernity that Arendt so opposed.⁸¹ It replaces representation with consultation between experts, treats the electorates of the democracies as inconveniences to be managed, rather than as genuinely sovereign.

In short, ‘governance’ replaces governments. But the models Arendt can come up with of ‘the people’, or some of them, acting politically in modernity are all drawn from brief periods of revolutionary upheaval: Russia 1917, Germany 1918, Hungary, 1956 etc. As several writers have noticed, Arendt tends to accept the norms of bourgeois liberal society (rights, constitutionalism, equality before the law, separation of public and private zones of life, etc) while decrying the lauding of self interest, money cynicism, the uprooting of tradition and settled ways of life that go with it.⁸² And as we’ve seen, the models of active citizenship are all revolts against the governance of that bourgeois order - and they are all examples of failure. The sole example of a successful ‘revolution’ in Arendt’s *oeuvre* is, of course, the American one.⁸³ The French

⁸¹ For an account that sees Arendt’s view of the political as a kind of utopian vision – of what it should be, rather than actually is in any given state, see McGowan, ‘Must Politics be Violent? Arendt’s Utopian Vision’ in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997 pp. 263-296.

⁸² Robert Pippin, *passim* in ‘Hannah Arendt and the Bourgeois Origins of Totalitarian Evil’ in Pippin, 2005; also Slavoj Žižek in Žižek, 2008, p. 122. I return to this point in the final chapter of the present work.

⁸³ It is possible to dispute the extent to which this *was* a ‘revolution’ in the sense of a complete and definitive upheaval of the social order usually associated with the term. Of course, the poor (and the Indian, and the black) experienced the re-imposition of a ruling order, so perhaps that sense the word is just - the wheel came full circle for them. Otherwise we might want to stick to the designation ‘American War of Independence’. Of course, Arendt wants to point at that which was revolutionary - the period in which the white colonists actually experienced a modicum of self-rule. But as she points out, it too was lost; by this criterion the ‘revolution’ was lost - King George was replaced by another Ruler (See ‘The Lost Treasure of the Revolution’ in Arendt, 1963).

Revolution, with the Jacobin attempt to remodel daily life from top to bottom, is seen as having failed for, chief among other reasons, the sheer pressure of trying to deal with the hunger of the masses. So perhaps we should argue that she should have been less hard on the bourgeois order, should have appreciated the solid advantages of its rule of law, freedom of the press etc and adopted a more reformist, less apocalyptic tone. But another way of looking at the matter is to argue that Arendt should have been *more* radical, following her insights right to their conclusions. This is the case I want to argue. The bourgeois order is in the process of pulverising the public space in which the political thrives; the phenomenon of the masses as consumers, apparently infantilised and entranced by consumerism, advertising and a 'specular' pseudo politics, in which the governed are invited to watch their leaders *perform* democracy arises not from a growth of mere 'stupidity' (as she will sometimes claim) but ideology.⁸⁴

In 'Understanding and Politics' (1954) Arendt goes some way to explaining her view on 'common sense' or understanding.⁸⁵ This is an interesting text that sheds light on her developing view of common sense as well as providing an insight into what she thinks she is doing when she endeavours to 'think what we are doing'. She presents common sense as both the essential presupposition to any knowledge, the connection between any theory and actual life *and* at the same time as somehow poisoned at the source. So 'common sense' as lost or defaced figures here as something more interesting than the verities of supposedly non-ideological thinking. And understanding is described here as the unending process by which we try to reconcile ourselves to our world, giving it meaning, in contrast with indoctrination. The essay describes a kind of hermeneutic, with 'preliminary understanding' as the necessary precursor to true knowledge, the starting point and goal of the sciences. Understanding does not have 'critical insight' but its terms and presuppositions permeate the work of the historian and the scientist. After the labour of knowledge, the understanding achieved now has a kind of meaning.

⁸⁴ See 'Europe's Union of Disenchantment', C. Bickerton, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 2008 issue for a discussion of the way technocratic governance has created a gulf between popular majorities and bureaucratic elites in the EU.

⁸⁵ In Kohn, 1994.

True understanding always returns to the judgments and prejudices that preceded and guided the strictly scientific inquiry. The sciences can only illuminate, but neither prove nor disprove the uncritical preliminary understanding from which they start. If the scientist, misguided by the very labour of his inquiry, begins to pose as an expert in politics and to despise the popular understanding from which he started, he loses immediately the Ariadne thread of common sense which alone will guide him securely through the labyrinth of his own results.⁸⁶

But this faculty has somehow been broken or lost⁸⁷: ‘we have lost our tools for understanding’ (p. 313), and this is not only in the face of the new menace of totalitarianism but is a loss that affects the western democracies too. All totalitarianism did was bring to light the ruin of our categories of understanding and judgment (p 318). The problem is that ‘preliminary understanding’ can only work from maxims and saws derived from the past.

All this precedes Arendt’s engagement with *The Critique of Judgment*, yet it is notable that many of the problems arising from that quarter are foreshadowed here. Preliminary understanding resembles Kant’s ‘determinate judgment’, which depends on precedent and rule. When confronted with the unprecedented, it is helpless. This is why we must now transcend both knowledge and preliminary understanding, as it is now practised — because it is degraded. In ‘Understanding and Politics’ she does not spell out any specific cause for this breakdown, but seems almost Nietzschean in her description of a world in which the capacity to generate meaning has been lost, where the rules of thought, the ‘clever rules of self interest’, that have persisted in popular language will no longer do. She does make one extraordinary claim, however: that there has been a growth of stupidity in the modern era:

Since the beginning of this century, the growth of meaninglessness has been accompanied by a loss of common sense. In many respects, this has appeared simply as an increasing stupidity. We know of no civilisation before ours in which people were gullible enough to form their buying habits in accordance with the maxim that ‘self praise is

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 311.

⁸⁷ See Serena Parekh on this: Parekh, S. 2008 p. 89.

the highest recommendation', the assumption of all advertising. Nor is it likely that any century before ours could have been persuaded to take seriously a therapy, which is said to help only if the patients pay a lot of money to those who administer it...⁸⁸

If it is difficult to take this completely seriously it is not because consumerism, and the infantilism of the public that accompanies it, is not a problem. Rather, this passage jars because having seen a problem Arendt is content to engage in a rather superficial culture critique. But the essay does end on a rather stronger note — an expression of hope in the capacities of the human to bring about something new, and to think without the preconceived categories of the past. We shall return to this theme, and to 'Understanding and Politics' later in this chapter.

So, according to Arendt, understanding, or common sense, is somehow basic to all attempts to find (or 'generate') meaning; but this faculty has somehow been perverted, broken or lost. Part of the problem seems to be totalitarianism, but the rot begins earlier and goes deeper. Despite this, human beings are capable of transcending this corrupted state: we have it in us to start something new, to be a new beginning. There is here the sense of something seen through a glass darkly. I want to argue that Arendt's political phenomenology allows her to grasp something essential about the (modern) human condition — the manner in which the political space has been occluded by technicians, 'experts' and other antipolitical forces.⁸⁹ She also has something valuable to say about what might need to be done to transcend this. But her account is incomplete, and her 'two voices' stem in part from the strengths and limitations of her approach. Although Arendt explicitly cites Kant's conception of reflective judgment relatively late in her career, the problematic is there from an early stage. Kant's account of common sense and judgment is both bound to the essentially conservative notion of 'taste' and potentially radical in its account of the *sense communis*: if this discussion attracts Arendt it is because she was already gripped by the problem of the status of 'common human

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 314.

⁸⁹ See also Villa, 1999, pp. 99-100, where judgment is seen as the crucial faculty in an age that has seen a loss of 'common sense'.

understanding' from an early stage. And the Kantian problem of aesthetic judgment and taste is implicitly political.

The Kant we shall be mainly concerned with here is the Kant of *The Critique of Judgment*.⁹⁰ *The Critique of Judgment* is concerned with judgment in its aesthetic and 'teleological' dimensions; we shall be almost exclusively concerned with what it has to say about the former. As aesthetic judgment is not obviously political we shall first need to explain the relevance of this text to Arendt's project, then examine what sort of resource it proved for her. So we shall be reading Arendt reading Kant, and doing this in a critical way. We shall see that there are some problems in the text, as well as in her reading, that may be regarded as 'symptomatic': they are not merely contingent but represent real and recurrent difficulties for Arendt's - or anyone's — attempt to think about judgment and its relation to the what Kant called 'the highest end intended for man, namely sociability' [*Geselligkeit*].⁹¹ Arendt is opening up a political ontology, trying to show that politics is more than the regulation of atomised individuals; at the heart of this is a political phenomenology, an idea of politics as occurring in a bounded 'space', or *topos*, in which individuals are disclosed to each other through their judgments and actions. In addition to this visual/spatial trope of the situation of judgment, Arendt has a story to tell about the *time* of judgment: how we got where we are now, and where we might be headed next. Her account is problematised by the question of authority: what, or who, authorises our judgments? This question touches on the very character of 'post enlightenment' political judgment, and Arendt's responses oscillate between a more conservative and a more radical character — as do Kant's. As Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* is the key text for all this, we shall now move to consider what was in it that attracted Arendt.⁹²

⁹⁰ For a more general account of Kant on judgment see Scherer, *The Crisis of Judgment in Kant's Three Critiques* 1995, *passim*. The Third Critique is discussed in chapter 7 of that work.

⁹¹ Kant, I 'Conjectural Beginnings of Human History' in *On History*, Ed. Beck p. 60.

⁹² For a more general account of political judgment — which considers Kant and Arendt in this context — see *The Concept of Political Judgment*, Steinberger, 1993 *passim*.

The Critique of Judgment

The Critique of Judgment (1790) is the third work in a ‘critical trilogy’. Following *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, much revised second edition 1787) and *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). The trilogy comprises Kant’s critical project, no less than the self examination of reason that Kant took to be the indispensable response to his ‘epoch’: ‘our epoch is, in especial degree, the epoch of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit.’⁹³ ‘Everything’ he makes clear, must include not only religion and law, but also reason itself. So Kant embarked on a kind of self-examination of reason, aiming to find a way between the warring parties of dogmatism and scepticism. Kant wants to be clear about what reason can and cannot do, and he differs from the dogmatist and the sceptic because critical philosophy ‘does not consider the question objectively, but in relation to the foundation of the knowledge upon which the question is based.’⁹⁴

The first critique attempts to establish the necessary conditions for an experience, i.e., what it is humans can genuinely experience, as distinct from that which we cannot experience and can only speculate about. The former are proper objects of knowledge, according to Kant, the latter are not, though they remain of great interest to us. According to Kant, if we attempt to reason about the latter (e.g., The soul, the existence of God) on the basis of our experience of the former we are undermined by internal inconsistencies, and led into dead ends. The sensible (‘phenomenal’) world is the realm of knowledge, the supersensible (‘noumenal’) that of faith or speculation: we can only know things as they appear to us, not as they are in themselves.

The second critique is a work of moral philosophy. In it Kant tries to show that morality cannot be based in the desire to be happy, achieve perfection, exercise virtue, etc., but rather in our ability to act on principle. As creatures inhabiting the sensible world, that of appearances (the ‘phenomenal’ world), we are subject to the laws of nature, like everything else. In that world

⁹³ Kant, I *Critique of Pure Reason*, A xii.

⁹⁴ Ibid. A 484/B 512.

we are subject to the chain of cause-and-effect: we are not free. But if we are not free, then we cannot be exposed to moral blame or praise, since ‘ought implies can’. It is hard to see how creatures like us, driven by environmental and biological causes, subject to the powerful push and pull of appetite and aversion, can make moral choices. Morality has its basis in freedom, but we do not appear to be free. To be moral, we need autonomy. According to Kant, the fact that we are moral beings is a result of the fact that the Will can be self-determining. When we act on principle, from a sense of duty, we are not the playthings of appetite or aversion, but are acting according to the dictates of the Moral Law. To act morally is to act rationally and freely. We act rationally because we act according to maxims that one can apply to all rational beings and which do not come under the sway of necessity. This is also to act freely, as when we act according to the Moral Law, a demand of Reason, we are genuinely autonomous, as we have given the law to ourselves. Kant also holds that our status as moral agents implies a belief in, but not knowledge of, God and immortality. Kant’s full justification for this need not detain us here; whatever its merits, we can see it as another stage in the critical project.

The third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, is in two parts: ‘The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment’ and ‘The Critique of Teleological Judgment’. As the title implies, this is a critique of our power to make judgments (*Urteilkraft*). While the other two critiques focused on our ability to make certain types of judgment (theoretical and practical) here the inquiry is into judgment itself. The critique proceeds through an examination of two difficult areas of judgment: aesthetic judgments of taste and teleological judgment. Both are difficult because they do not assume a pre-existing law or concept for their operation. They are important because this characteristic hints at a role for judgment quite different, and perhaps prior to, that of the other two critiques. Kant makes this distinction clear, as we have seen, through the distinction between determinant and reflective judgment — of which more below. At the heart of Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment lies the assumption that genuine aesthetic judgments must be communicable; we do not judge alone, but with others in a *sensus communis*. Kant also here

introduces the ‘genius’: a creative force that goes beyond the past’s inherited standards of judgment. Still, Kant argues, even the genius needs the Taste of the *sensus communis* to interpret his productions and ratify them as genuine, and not mere babble. Our question will be about the status of this ‘Taste’, its relation to ‘common sense’ and its role as marker of sound judgment in Kant and Arendt.

Arendt on Judgment and Common Sense

Arendt became increasingly interested in the question of political judgment from the late 1950s onwards, an interest which may have been made even keener after her experience of the Eichmann trial. This was also the time in which she became increasingly interested in the Kant of *The Critique of Judgment*. She is mainly interested in how what he has to say about aesthetic (reflective) judgment can be turned to her purposes: Arendt’s is a creative engagement with Kant, not a work of scholarly reconstruction. But although she is not trying merely to apply Kantian ‘doctrine’ to politics we do find important problems in her discussion of political judgment that can be traced back to the *Critique of Judgment*. I want to concentrate in what follows on two things: the way in which Arendt’s conception of political judgment developed out of her reading of Kant, and some of the areas of difficulty that continued to affect her discussion of the issues.

There are two aspects to our area of interest. The first is the idea of a *topos* of judgment: the manner in which it is situated in a ‘community of judges’. This implies a consideration of what Kant and Arendt meant by terms like ‘common sense’, *sensus communis* and ‘taste’, but also the way in which these things can appear to us, the phenomenology of political judgment.⁹⁵ These are two faces of the same problem, as it is the point in history we have reached which is

⁹⁵ In what follows I shall name what Kant calls ‘the common or vulgar sense’ ‘common sense’. The Latin term *sensus communis* is reserved for the critical public faculty that is appealed to in judgment. This acknowledges the distinction that we find in Arendt and Kant between the two varieties of shared sense. See also Dostal who makes the same distinction (Dostal, ‘Judging Human Action: Arendt’s Appropriation of Kant’, in Beiner & Nedelsky, 2001, p.142). This is not a distinction without a difference as it marks the site of ambivalence about who has what kind of powers: it is a political problem, as we shall see.

the time of the crisis of political space. As we shall see, a philosophy and phenomenology of judgment are inextricable: judgment needs others, and these others must be - in some sense - visible to each other. If Arendt's thinking of our place in the interval between a moribund tradition and an unknowable future is entangled and unresolved, this is partly because the aporias she confronts are already present in Kant's critical project. *The Critique of Judgment* in particular presents us with an account of the difficulties of judgment, not their resolution, and these difficulties resurface in Arendt's attempt to 'think what we are doing'.

This is important because any sustained attempt to think through the central problems of political philosophy as they present themselves to modernity, let alone any attempt at a critique of that modernity, must confront the difficulties of judgment. Arendt's preoccupation with public space (visibility) and judgment (discrimination) points to an even greater question: whether a meaningful public life in the epoch of modernity is possible. As Kant's preoccupation with judgment in *The Critique of Judgment* has a special bearing on her work we will now look at the way in which the problem of judgment and taste is presented there.⁹⁶

Kant's remarks form part of a long tradition of philosophical, artistic and political discourse on the mental capacities of "the people." It arises in part from the dilemma of one who reflects: how should reflection, especially philosophical or political reflection, view the mass who presumably have not undertaken the same labour of thought? Here one is considering the apparent fact that the few have been doing a special kind of thinking, while the many have not. It is a large subject, and here I want only to discuss briefly the political-philosophical dimension, which associates the capacity to think well with the ability to rule oneself – the project of autonomy. If we assume for now that there is such a thing as the 'enlightened' person, what view should he or she take toward 'the others'? This is important for our inquiry because much of what follows concerns Kant's and Arendt's stance on this

⁹⁶ See Kleist, 2000 for a discussion of Kant's *sensus communis* from a phenomenological angle. Kleist considers Arendt's interpretation/appropriation of Kant's ideas a number of times, especially at pp. 79-84.

question. Any number of stances could be taken, but here are three for our consideration:

(1) *The Conservative view.* The mass of people is incapable of self-rule and full understanding. Just as a child has real virtues not found in the adult, the common sense (or folk ways, or whatever) of the people contain real wisdom, but it is essentially unreflective, even unconscious. A smaller group, to guide and protect from those who would corrupt and mislead, must lead the people.

(2) *The 'Progressive' view.* The people have the potential to be enlightened but are currently in a state of 'darkness'. They are deluded, and are led by others, perhaps for their own good, more likely because their elites are exploiting them. This time of darkness is coming to an end: the people must be encouraged to throw off their 'mind-forged manacles'.

Looking just at the first two stances, we can say that Kant seems to take a progressive view against the conservative one.⁹⁷ In this he is in the stream of liberal/left 'progressive' thinking since the enlightenment. Both views have variants, one of which is particularly relevant here and which we could call 'the people as mob (or rabble)'. Versions of this view can be available to conservatives and progressives. Here the people are seen as a threat to order and good sense, whether because corrupted by subversive ideas, religious fanaticism, populist demagogues etc. On the left the ambiguous role of populist movements - the *lumpenproletariat* available as a mob of the terroristic right; on the right, the mob as underclass, semi criminalised, *sans culottes*.

We now propose a third phenomenon, which has preserved and transformed aspects of both of the previous views:

(3) *The 'Post-political' Technocratic view.* The people have a degree of insight in their lives as consumers; more information will tend to improve the quality of their choices as consumers.

⁹⁷ Kant's account of enlightenment can *also* be taken as the proposal that enlightenment is a permanent possibility for the human mind, rather than a historical event that one anticipates. But it is the latter sense I shall focus on here.

They express their choices through the revealed preferences of e.g. the market, which may be corrected for their own good by the state or other bodies with more information. An elite is best placed to filter the large amount of data modern society needs, and to make the larger decisions on behalf of the people, who have neither the time nor the inclination to do this. Assuming the elite does its job well the people will benefit and the elite will have its position at least tacitly endorsed by the citizens/consumers.

This view is distinguished from traditional conservatism by the emphasis on instrumental, bureaucratic reason, and the primacy of the market. This ‘managerial’ approach applies enlightenment techniques of prediction and control in order to administer the mass of citizen/consumers. This perspective has carried forward the conservative view in that it assumes the predominance of an elite, which is in receipt of the data and the expertise to decide on behalf of the mass. Important here is the rhetoric of choice, but this amounts mainly to the ‘negative freedom’ of the rights and laws of the state and the apparent sovereignty of the consumer.⁹⁸ The freedom of the citizen is negated by the irrationality of the consumer, a creature infantilised, entertained and dominated by the forces of the economy. It is the dominance of this model that is the political problem for Arendt as well as those who see themselves as in some sense inheritors of the second, ‘progressive’ view.⁹⁹ So it is important to get clear what the capacities and prospects of ‘popular reason’ are. Do Kant and Arendt regard the common sense of the mass of people as sufficient to allow them to judge for themselves?

Arendt’s account of the vicissitudes of political judgment in history is a phenomenological account of the public realm and those who appear in it, staying close to the ‘life world’ and avoiding any determinism. The ‘conservative’ Arendt mourns and invokes a kind of Taste that has been corrupted by modernity. But there is much more to her than this: she goes on to

⁹⁸ Arguably, this extends to the entire democratic process, which is operated in a way to ensure that no major change can occur. See Dean, 2009 *passim*.

⁹⁹ The Frankfurt school, most notably: See, for instance, Adorno and Horkheimer, 1993. More recently Sheldon Wolin, (2008) Foucault, (1991) Agamben, (1978) and Hardt and Negri, (2001).

launch an historical/analytical account of the modern collapse of moral and political traditions, as well as an investigation into the means by which this collapse might be overcome.

Kant's 'common human understanding', like the preliminary or basic knowing Arendt discusses in 'Understanding and Politics,' encounters a world that it partially constitutes but from which it is also estranged.¹⁰⁰ In its alienated form scientific knowledge of nature reappears in a positivistic light, while human action and judgment in history stand over against the present as tradition and custom - a precipitate of old judgments (similar to Husserl's notion of sedimentation).¹⁰¹ So the subject is confronted by her own work, although she does not recognise it as such. Judgment that would know itself *as* judgment, would effect a reconciliation with the world seen again as a home, and not a chilly Other: a reversal of the self-forgetting of judgment. This happens for us at the point of crisis for the common understanding and its inherited wisdom. Thus thinking must proceed 'without bannisters'. Judgment needs to be autonomous from theoretical reason, as what is at stake is nothing less than the possibility of human meaning.¹⁰² This meaning requires a space in which intersubjectivity – our plurality — lets the specifically human shine out. The public space of the political is revealed as essential; for it is here that the uniquely human capacity for self-disclosure through uncoerced judgment emerges.

I now turn to a close examination of the way Hannah Arendt's notion of political judgment developed in the period 1954 – 1970, and of the way Kant's presentation in the 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgment' informed her thinking.¹⁰³

This is a time of increasing interest on her part in the Kant of *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), and although she does speculate on what Kant's 'unwritten treatise' on

¹⁰⁰ There are echoes of this post-Kantian idea of a self-created yet alienated world in Lukacs: See Lukacs, G *History and Class Consciousness*, *passim* 1975.

¹⁰¹ See d'Entreves, 1994 pp. 135-8 for an alternative view.

¹⁰² This is why Villa argues that judgment emerges as important when common sense is under threat. While for Richard Bernstein judgment connects to action and *phronesis*, for Villa it is quite separate from them both. See Villa, 1999, chapter 4; Bernstein, 'Judging – the Actor and the Spectator' in Bernstein, 1986.

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politics might have been like she is mainly interested in how what he has to say about aesthetic (reflective) judgment can be turned to serve her purposes. Problems in the *Critique of Judgment* recur in Arendt when she tries to apply Kant's conception of reflective judgment to politics.¹⁰⁴ The first is that of the *topos* of judgment: the manner in which it is to be situated in a 'community of judges'. This implies a consideration of what Arendt and Kant mean by 'common sense,' *sensus communis* and 'taste', but also the way in which these things might appear to us: the phenomenology of political judgment. Another is concerned with the time of judgment, 'between past and future'. Arendt, writing in the wake of a great catastrophe, can be seen here as trying to think through and against her time, the time of radical nihilism, of history as 'melancholy haphazardness' (Kant). If her thinking of the interval between a fissured and moribund tradition and an unknowable future remains entangled and unresolved this is partly because the aporias she is confronted with were already at the centre of the critical project. As we have seen, Kant's work in general and the *Critique of Judgment* in particular present us with an account of the difficulties of judgment, not their resolution, and these difficulties are reconfigured in Arendt's attempt to 'think what we are doing'.

For Arendt the question of what role judgment plays is absolutely central to the problem of what a meaningful public life in the epoch of modernity might be: her preoccupation is with visibility (public space) and discrimination (judgment). A number of Kant's preoccupations seem to have an especial bearing on Arendt's work, with the problem of judgment lying at the centre. In order to see the significance of these problems for Arendt, we therefore need to look first at the way in which Kant presents the problems of judgment and taste.

¹⁰⁴ My account of Kantian judgment is indebted to Howard Caygill's *The Art of Judgment* (Blackwell, 1989, *passim*). This book, in my view, remains absolutely indispensable for anyone seriously interested in the topic.

As we have seen, Kant distinguishes between 'determinate' and 'reflective' judgment, as two ways of thinking the universal and the particular.¹⁰⁵ In the former, the universal is already known and the judgment subsumes the particular under it; in the latter only the particular is given and the universal has to be found by a process of reflection. Arendt is famously associated with the latter in her attempt to think political judgment as somehow free from a given law, but it is important not to lose sight of the connection between the two classes of judgment. The notion of a world that we inhabit, that can be considered as objective and yet also shaped by our creative activity, the realm of necessity and freedom, is vital to Arendt and Kant. Vital, but aporetic: we seem to have two spheres, that of the domain of theoretical reason, where 'determinate' judgment monopolises the regimes of truth (objectivity and necessity) and that of reflective judgment, where art, religion and perhaps politics subsist. Arendt is usually represented as persisting in this problematic gulf between truth and value, a separation that seems to concede far too much to an obsolescent positivism. Arendt's apparent acquiescence in this schism of the faculties has prompted one of the central objections to her understanding of what political judgment is. After all, say her critics, if judgment (Arendt is almost always thinking of reflective judgment when she refers to judgment) is separated from truth, this makes it arbitrary, which gravely damages the credibility of her account of the character of judgment.¹⁰⁶

One way of thinking about the relation between the two kinds of judgment is to sustain an awareness that every determinate judgment is preceded and shadowed by reflective judgment.¹⁰⁷ The possibility of an intersubjective realm rests, not on an already given, passively received world of fact, but on the imaginative,

¹⁰⁵ A full and illuminating account of the role of judgment in Kant is given in Caygill, 1989, *passim*.

¹⁰⁶ E.g. Kateb, *passim*.

¹⁰⁷ See J Bernstein, 1992 *passim* for a discussion of this relation of reflective to determinate judgment.

discriminating process of reflective judgment, underdetermined by concepts. But for this to be possible, for judgment to find its way, as it were, there must already be a world in which we can find ourselves at home, always already shaped by an inventive engagement in which discovery and creation occur, constituting a world. This process of 'world-making' makes judgment possible, and therefore cannot be subjected to it in its theoretical, practical or aesthetic applications. We saw that through a process in which the understanding disowns its inventive partnership with the imagination, the objective world comes to stand as both entirely alien and passively received by the senses.

This 'self alienation of the understanding' has implications that go beyond the metaphysical to the historical and political.¹⁰⁸ Production (imagination) and legislation (understanding) must be thought of as together constituting a world; but it is their estrangement that marks our experience of modernity. We cannot hope to anneal this split by the mere recitation of the narrative of how division came about, any more than the psychoanalyst cures the patient by just getting them to recite the pathogenetic account.

It is in this light that I want to reconsider Arendt's installation of reflective judgment at the centre of her political philosophy. Her refusal to accept that judgment is subject to the legislation of the understanding stems from a resistance to the encroachments of that faculty into political life. Theoretical reason, with its illusions of certainty, threatens to abolish politics because it eliminates freedom: it holds its (determinate) judgments to be coercive, because 'true'. Arendt's understanding of the role of judgment in political life is one that would distinguish between the true and the meaningful, the latter being the effect of reflective judgment, the political faculty that occurs in the 'interspaces' of human plurality in the encounter with that which

¹⁰⁸ d'Entreves takes the view that it is the Kantian model of knowledge that stops Arendt from giving argumentation and rationality their proper place in judgment. But his account underplays the faculty of reflective judgment, and the resulting underdetermination of judgment by knowledge. See d'Entreves, 1994 pp.135-138.

appears to us.¹⁰⁹ Thinking, the 'wind of thought', has the role of disengaging the individual from the world of action and the grip of inherited (determinate) judgments, in order that the work of judgment may resume. In this the judge is like the genius in *The Critique of Judgment*: both the artist and the judge are working with the imagination, both repeating the discovery and creation that shapes a world (the subject of *The Critique of Pure Reason*), only now we see plainly that which was only implicit in the first critique: that *judgment springs from natality: like action, it begins anew each time*. Judgment does not merely recall what went before, but adds something in a new encounter with that which was 'given': the drama of *anagnoresis*.¹¹⁰ This does not mean, however, that imagination, freed from the trammels of the understanding, can go its own way. The result would be arbitrary judgment, and Arendt is concerned to resist this also. The paradoxical demand is that judgment be free, but lawful. This is achieved through its relation to others, and it is here that Kant's notion of taste and common sense is revisited.

An understanding of what is meant by 'common sense' and the way it gets differentiated from 'taste' is crucial in determining how judgment itself is grasped.¹¹¹ It is an ambiguous term, and both Kant and Arendt seem to use it in various ways at various times; or at least to use it in ways that would seem to have different, often mutually incompatible consequences and implications.¹¹² The various meanings are present in Kant, and

¹⁰⁹ It's this approach that has caused the most unease among those commentators who want to 'Habermasianise' Arendt: i.e., to tie judgment closely to rational argument. Albrecht Wellmer attributes this 'failure' on Arendt's part to her Kantian antecedents, while Seyla Benhabib wants to develop the 'Kantian' content in Arendt's theory of judgment. My argument here runs in a different direction to both of these views: I view Arendt's idiosyncratic Kantianism as enabling her to rethink what it means to be *political* (not in the first place moral), and I regard her detachment from Kantian moral theory as a fruitful move in this direction. See A Wellmer, 'Hannah Arendt on Judgment: the Unwritten Doctrine of Reason' and Seyla Benhabib, 'Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Hannah Arendt's Thought' in Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001. In addition, any account of judgment that ignores or underplays the role of reflective judgment, as for example d'Entreves does, will miss the *futural* orientation of Arendt's considerations on judgment and political action. See d'Entreves, 1995, chapter 3, esp. 132-138. And see Villa, 1999 pp. 98-103.

¹¹⁰ Recognition.

¹¹¹ See Gottsegen, 1994 p.148. He suggests 'taste' versus 'Taste' (with a capital 'T'), when he discusses the two varieties of judgment – a distinction that roughly corresponds to the one I am trying to mark through the 'common sense'/'*sensus communis*' difference.

¹¹² For some recent discussions: see Parekh, S 2008 Chapters 3 and 6 on the terms, and also Lara, 2007 p. 60-63 and pp. 89 ff. Note how easy it is to confound the terms.

when we revisit them it is easy to see their political meaning.¹¹³ There is common sense as

...the opinion of the multitude, of whose applause the philosopher is ashamed, while the popular charlatan glories and confides in it.¹¹⁴

Actually, Kant's assessment of common sense in this meaning is not entirely harsh: in the same discussion he goes on to remark that it is 'useful...in its own way', which is 'judgments which apply immediately to experience'. But it (like 'speculative understanding') needs 'critical reason' to keep it within its proper bounds. It must be 'well considered and reasonable'. Kant's complaint here is that it has been invoked inappropriately to endorse judgments that lie outside of its domain of competence. The opinion of the multitude is sound if it confines itself to what it can know; but it can be led astray and corrupted by 'popular charlatans' (in a manner reminiscent of the way in which the common people might be transformed into a mob by a demagogue). Thus we already have common sense as something natural and good, which can be found in a state of corruption.

In paragraph 20 of *The Critique of Judgment*, in his discussion of the judgment of taste, Kant introduces the necessity for a 'subjective principle, which judges only by feeling rather than by concepts, though nonetheless with universal validity, what is liked or disliked...' and says it must be regarded as a 'common sense'; he then goes on:

This common sense is essentially distinct from the common understanding that is also sometimes called common sense (*sensus communis*); for the latter judges not by feeling but always by concepts....usually...conceived obscurely¹¹⁵

From the way that the terms 'common sense' and *sensus communis* are being employed

¹¹³ See Bradshaw, 1989 pp. 94-99 on common sense as an ambiguous ground for judgment.

¹¹⁴ Kant, 2004 p. 51.

¹¹⁵ Kant, 1928, section 201.

here it would seem that they are interchangeable, but that there are *two* activities or principles: one is determined by concepts (common understanding) the other by feeling. The terms may be being used interchangeably, but an important distinction is being made here.¹¹⁶ The former looks like it might be the prejudice of the ignorant mob, stirred up perhaps by some charlatan. The latter is signalled by a feeling. But what kind of feeling? Kant says it is ‘pleasure’. The claim that a *feeling* signals the judgment of taste will cause problems for Arendt when she tries to translate aesthetic reflective judgment into political terms. Kant connects the workings of taste to the supersensible ground of judgment,¹¹⁷ which, far from encouraging plurality and dissent, would impose, if not a legislating authority, a kind of indeterminate metaphysical grounding. Either the sign of pleasure is the sign of the relation of the judge to the supersensible (which is inscrutable yet authoritative, a problem for a philosopher who wants to stress the plurality of perspectives rather than the Truth), or it gets ‘naturalised’, in which case it becomes a question of what ‘normal’ people should be feeling (a problem for a philosopher who wants to lift judgment above psychology or sociology). Both interpretations are problematic.

I take it that the former notion, of a sense possessed by everyone,¹¹⁸ is close to that described by Kant in paragraph 40 as

common human understanding, which is merely man’s sound (but not yet cultivated) understanding....the very least we are entitled to expect from anyone who lays claim to the name of human being

¹¹⁶ See Ricoeur, 1995/2000, p 98. As he says, we have to distinguish between what Kant is discussing and a mere empirical consensus.

¹¹⁷ As EE Kleist points out (Kleist, 2000 pp. 78 ff) Arendt notices two aspects to Kant’s account –one emphasising ‘purposiveness’ (and thus seeming to involve ‘metaphysical excess’ p. 80), the other the notion of exemplary validity. It is the latter that Arendt prefers in her *Lectures of Kant’s Political Philosophy*. ‘When Kant introduces the indeterminate concept of a supersensible substrate of humanity and nature, we may ask whether this is a gratuitously dogmatic way to insist upon the purposiveness of the relation between humans and the world of appearances. Arendt prefers...the solution which gives to the example a role in reflective judgment analogous to that of the schema in determinative judgment’ (Kleist 2000, p. 80).

¹¹⁸ Plain common sense: ‘*gemeinen Menschenverstand*.’

In *The Critique of Pure Reason* Kant calls this

a peculiar talent, which can be practiced only and cannot be taught. It is the specific quality of so-called mother wit, and its lack no school can make good¹¹⁹.

To be deficient in this is ‘what is ordinarily called stupidity’.¹²⁰ It is the use of concepts in determinate judgments, something we can usually expect people to be able to do.

Kant makes the distinction, in *The Critique of Judgment* and elsewhere, between this common sense as common human understanding, which he writes is ‘*vulgar* – i.e. something found everywhere, the possession of which involves no merit or superiority whatsoever’ and common sense as a public sense (*sensus communis*) meaning

the idea of a sense shared by all of us, i.e. a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (*a priori*) in our thought, of everyone else’s way of presenting something, in order as it were to compare our own judgment with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones, an illusion that would have a prejudicial effect on the judgment.¹²¹

This does not involve the mere estimation of others’ actual views. It is not a matter of ‘gathering votes and asking other people what kind of sensation they are having.’¹²² One abstracts from all that is merely particular to oneself in order to ‘compare our judgment not so much with the actual as rather with the possible judgments of others and thus put ourselves in

¹¹⁹ Kant, 1929: A 133/B 172.

¹²⁰ Perhaps we can see the basis for Arendt’s claim in *Between Past and Future* that there has been an increase in stupidity: she means it in Kant’s precise sense: people don’t judge. See Villa, 1999, p. 100.

¹²¹ Kant, 1928, Para 40.

¹²² Ibid. Para 31.

the position of everyone else.¹²³ Judgment must be communicable: it is a public faculty. Although Kant presents the *sensus communis* as a transcendental condition of judgment in the context of a discussion of aesthetic reflective judgment, Arendt wants to employ it for political judgment. Because the judgment is reflective, it is not determined by a concept; because it is exercised as a public faculty it escapes the arbitrary nature of the merely subjective. Judgment is here conceived as literally *intersubjective*.

Returning to *The Critique of Judgment*, it is possible to ask what the relation actually is between common sense, *sensus communis* and taste.

Later in paragraph 40 Kant comments, in a passage cited by Arendt in the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, on the three 'maxims of common human understanding', which are (1) to think for oneself; (2) to think from the standpoint of everyone else; and (3) to think always consistently.¹²⁴

It is the second principle that is relevant here, as it is the one that corresponds to judgment, enabling the judge to attain a universal [*allgemein*] standpoint. It is much cited as the principle of the 'enlarged mind' (which Kant tells us it is) *and* as the mark of the *sensus communis*, which is odd, as Kant has just made it clear that here he is speaking of the common human understanding and not the *sensus communis*. To conflate them is to lose the all-important distinction between the two sorts of 'common sense'. That Arendt does just this is a regular claim of the critics, but it is not impossible that Kant too is trying to say different and possibly incompatible things at the same time. Nevertheless, if membership of the *sensus communis* is to be available to humans and not only angels it must somehow be rooted in the same 'nature' as our more mundane senses.¹²⁵

¹²³ Ibid. Para. 40.

¹²⁴ In Arendt, 1982, p. 71. See also Rossi, P, 'Public Argument and Social Responsibility' for an interesting attempt to rewrite these maxims, in Kneller & Axinn, 1998 pp. 72-77.

¹²⁵ On the tension between the democratic and aristocratic character of judgment see Kleist, *Judging Appearances* 2000 p. 141.

We have here the notion of a common and somehow natural faculty that can go astray, if not policed by critical reason.¹²⁶ Kant also presents us with the *sensus communis* as the idea of a sense shared by all, 'a power to judge...' which is not the same as the judgment of sense, as it is a result of the operation of reflection. Unlike our response to the taste of canary wine it must be publicly communicable. Kant presents this latter in the context of the discussion of the judgment of beauty and comments:

Whenever we make a judgment declaring something to be beautiful, we permit no one to hold a different opinion, even though we base our judgment only on our feeling rather than on concepts; hence we regard this underlying feeling as a common rather than a private feeling. But if we are to use this common sense in such a way, we cannot base it on experience...it does not say that everyone *will* agree with my judgment, but that he ought to. [It] is a mere ideal standard.¹²⁷

It is a paradoxical demand that not everyone will be able to assent to, even though they ought to:

...he demands that they agree. He reproaches them if they judge differently, and denies that they have taste, which he nevertheless demands of them, as something they ought to have.¹²⁸

But why should a disagreement be taken as evidence of a lack of taste? If the one who pronounces his judgment doesn't find agreement in his interlocutor (and as we have seen, Kant is clear that he may not) he may then deny they have taste; but he might equally now take part in a discussion with the other about the disagreement. This would be what Kant in paragraph 56 of *The Critique of Judgment* calls a 'quarrel' about a judgment of taste: the disagreement implies the possibility of agreement (it is therefore not private), but does not place the judgment beyond dispute (it is not based on an objective concept).

¹²⁶ See Gottsegen, (1994) on this point: he asks the pertinent question of the relation between (corruptible) common sense and judgment. He remarks that it 'is as if Arendt were to distinguish between taste and Taste' (p 148). Indeed. But the roots of this problem go back at least to Kant, and rather than taste and Taste, I would use 'common sense' and *sensus communis*. But there are disabling difficulties for political thought in this idea of 'taste' as I seek to show. See also Ranciere (*passim*: it is a key theme in much of his recent work) for exploration of the distinction between that which is policed (the essentially platonic notion of the right partitions and distributions, the 'correct' use of reason) versus actual politics and democracy –which tend to challenge the 'order of the police'.

¹²⁷ Kant, 1928, Para. 22.

¹²⁸ Ibid. Para. 7.

This takes us to the heart of the problem of the authority of our judgments. Kant presents the *sensus communis* in a quite equivocal way, as we have seen, as somehow *of* but at the same time distinct *from* 'common human understanding.'¹²⁹ Kant tells us that the judge of beauty must woo the other's agreement, and that agreement is not certain, but he connects his account of the workings of taste to the supersensible ground of judgment which – if we forget that it is an unknowable x that cannot authorize anything - would, far from encouraging plurality and dissent, seem to provide an authority of precisely the kind Arendt needs to shun.

Kant wants to show that 'judgment is a mediating link in the chain of man's a priori powers, the powers on which all legislation must depend.'¹³⁰ To do this he must reject the empirical interest, and rest the power to judge the beautiful on 'that which may have reference a priori...to a judgment of taste.'¹³¹ This might seem to be a victory for legislation – or rather authority, since the judgment is not subject to a direct legislation - over freedom. Things are not so easily resolved, however. Everything again revolves around the meaning of *sensus communis*. We saw above that the judgment of taste involves comparing 'our own judgment with human reason in general [...] thus escaping the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones.'¹³² The judgment has at its heart the transcendence of the *sensus privatus* in a move that would take in the plurality of other ways of representing, but the question here is: what does it *mean* to make a 'proper' judgment of taste? bluntly: who's to say?

Kant's answer seems to be: taste, as revealed by tradition.¹³³ In the sections in which

¹²⁹ Again, I take it that Gottsegen is touching on the same problematical distinction in *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* where he suggests a distinction between taste and Taste. See Gottsegen, 1994 p. 148.

¹³⁰ Kant, Op Cit Para 41

¹³¹ Ibid. Para 41

¹³² Ibid. Para 40

¹³³ There is a real problem in the knot formed by the intersection of the already existing, shared common understanding and the genuinely new, as I seek to show here. That is why it cannot be enough to say as Gottsegen

he discusses the relation between Genius and tradition we read that taste disciplines genius, 'clips its wings' in the famous phrase.¹³⁴ So taste appears to genius as a kind of law, the confrontation between the free productions of the imagination and the lawfulness of the understanding: 'it is necessary that the imagination in its freedom be commensurate with the lawfulness of the understanding' and if there is conflict, it had better be taste that wins.¹³⁵ But what 'disciplines' taste? Taste, after all, will be subject to the prejudices and distortions of interest and error (the 'Bias of Reason').¹³⁶ The genius produces something genuinely new, not from some pre-existing rule or model, and so he modifies the tradition ('art acquires a new rule by this, thus showing that the talent is exemplary'); but his work is saved from being arbitrary by the disciplining power of taste.¹³⁷ A judgment of taste derives from the feeling of pleasure arising in the judge, which is communicable: the other, or others, should be having this experience too. But the pleasure that the judge feels arises because of the 'free play' of the powers of the understanding and imagination 'within' him. This is a kind of harmony that the judge looks for in other judges. If he doesn't find it, it looks as if we have another quarrel. It appears as if the judgment of taste is dependent for its authority on a mysterious accord of the knowledge powers that escape the authority of judgment, since it is the accord that is always sought. Taste here would seem to mean the progressive negotiations over time of all the judges, stimulated at various intervals by the novel productions of genius: self-regulation through provisional consensus, but not final Law. So instead of regarding the *sensus communis* as a pre-existing source of validation for judgment we would do better to regard it as something that is always already coming into being *through the judgments themselves*.

does, in his otherwise impressive account of Arendt's development as a political thinker, that *phronesis* can be synthesised with a neo-Kantian notion of opinion and judgment. For him, an Arendtian *phronesis* would be 'dependent on and derivative of' a pre-existing *sensus communis*, see Gottsegen, 1994, p 232.

¹³⁴ Kant, Op Cit Para 50

¹³⁵ Ibid..

¹³⁶ See Gottsegen, 1994, p 148. Gottsegen, in my view, never really grapples with the difficulties inherent in a notion of taste as applied to political thought.

¹³⁷ Kant, Op Cit 49

Can the disagreements be legislated for by the supersensible substrate? No, as we have no direct access to this realm:

as for the subjective principle - i.e., the indeterminate idea of the supersensible in us - as the sole key for solving the mystery of this ability (i.e. taste) concealed from us even as to its sources, we can do no more than to point to it; but there is nothing we can do that would allow us to grasp it any further.¹³⁸

The supersensible is an idea, not a supreme court; we are left with the judgments of taste, based on a mysterious accord of the knowledge powers. Not arbitrary, thanks to the *sensus communis*, but not bound by law or concept, hence the possibility of new works of genius.¹³⁹

The productions of the free imagination, fine art, get their rule from 'aesthetic ideas, which are essentially distinct from rational ideas of determinate purposes.'¹⁴⁰ They are products that have spirit, spirit that sets the mental powers into a swing through the exhibition of these aesthetic ideas. An aesthetic idea is

a presentation of the imagination that prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever...can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it. It is easy to see that an aesthetic idea is the counterpart (pendant) of a rational idea, which is, conversely, a concept to which no intuition (presentation of the imagination) can be adequate¹⁴¹

The genius produces, through the aesthetic idea, a movement or delirium, a play or a swing of the powers of imagination and understanding, and one that the latter will not stand over in a legislative act. The knowledge powers are set in a free motion, and

¹³⁸ Ibid. Para. 57.

¹³⁹ As E.E. Kleist points out, the notion of a *sensus communis* solves the problem of purposiveness/harmony. This latter emerges from the *sensus communis*, from the free play of imagination and understanding, not from some supersensible substrate 'behind' appearances. See Kleist, 200 p. 94.

¹⁴⁰ Kant, Op. Cit. Para 58.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. Para. 49.

just as this is a 'happy relation' that cannot be taught, so the products of genius have exemplary significance: they are examples to be followed by other geniuses, but not slavishly copied.

Fine art, Kant maintains, produces symbols. Like the schemata they are *hypotyposes*, i.e., means by which concepts can be conjoined with intuitions. In schematic hypotyposis the understanding has a concept which has a corresponding intuition given a priori; but in symbolic hypotyposis there is a concept available to reason alone, and to which no intuition could correspond, so the symbol acts as an indirect presentation of the concept, i.e., an object is supplied which stands for some ineffable other. Kant wants to claim that the beautiful is the symbol for the moral, but again it seems as if we are at the brink of that which is *unthought*, indeed unthinkable and excessive in its sublime force, not only to the language of morality, but to all language: a play of the powers beyond legislation. The example or symbol can 'send us' but there is no precise knowing where we will end up and we may doubt whether anything so wonderful and mysterious can be on a pre-existing moral agenda.

This hardly seems to be extravagant language, given (for example) Kant's description of that other hypotyposis, the schematism as

an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze¹⁴².

The mystery wrapped in an enigma that shadows both the symbolic/ analogical and the schematic/logical procedures of the powers of presentation is that of judgment itself, its possibility. Judgment is in the end not subject to rule: it distinguishes 'whether something does or does not stand under a given rule,' and any

¹⁴² *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A141/B180.

rule that would instruct judgment in its task would need guidance from judgment, and so on *ad infinitum*.¹⁴³ Judgment, in both its determinate and reflective modes, involves the proportionality of the powers of legislating and imagining in an inventive activity (i.e. discovery and creation together) that starts out as a discriminating, appraising process that is underdetermined by rules. It is in this sense that reflective judgment may be regarded as prior to determinate judgment, and in a sense half obscured by it. While in some passages Kant can be read as trying to bring the power of judgment itself under a higher legislation, it is at least questionable whether this is the central effect of the discussion of judgment in *The Critique of Judgment* and elsewhere. An alternative reading would have the power of judgment as itself undetermined by law. The question of authority remains open.¹⁴⁴

I want to argue that this need not create any great problem for Arendt in her application of Kant, rather the reverse. Arendt wants to free judgment from legislation and this reading of Kant allows her to do so. It is not from this flank that Arendt is vulnerable on the question of authority as it is the *sensus communis* that 'legislates', not the supersensible.¹⁴⁵ However, she does not really resolve her somewhat uncritical grasp of the relation between judgment and pleasure, as if taste were a quasi-natural (not supersensible) substrate.

Arendt's phenomenological account of the vicissitudes of political judgment in history amounts to an account of the condition of the public realm and those who appear in it; a phenomenology shorn of 'iron laws' or *telos*. She is not tempted to ground law or morality in a set of propositions, noble lies or constitutions (or in the 'common sense' of the

¹⁴³ Ibid. 133/B172.

¹⁴⁴ See Kleist, 2000, pp. 78-88, also Bradshaw, 1989, pp. 94-99. Leah Bradshaw notices the continuity of judgment with common sense, but also the significance of the difference between authentic judgment and opinion. She presents the move as one of transcending what she calls 'cultural taste' (p. 94) through use of the imagination. Her argument would have been clearer with some more attention to the phenomenon of reflective judgment, which she does not discuss. She is right, however, to question Beiner's reading of what Arendt meant by judgment: judgment is not only the way in which we come to terms with what is – it is connected to willing and acting, to bringing about the new.

¹⁴⁵ See Japaridze, 1999 p.89: She makes the point that 'the *sensus communis* is a non-cognizable reference and as such only felt'. It is the status of this feeling as a sign for authority that is at question.

polis).¹⁴⁶ She starts from and tries to stay close to what 'shows up' for us in the 'life world'. When she can be read as elitist she is usually speaking in a mourning voice for what used to appear unveiled, forgetting her own strictures on natality and the absence of 'bannisters' for thought.¹⁴⁷

The upshot of this is that the humble world of the common understanding *does* have something in common with the *sensus communis*: they are both fields of play for the knowledge powers, judgment operating in the interest of the understanding in the former, on its own account in the latter. Common human understanding encounters a world that it is intimately involved in forming: but it is alienated from its own work. This appears (or returns) to it in two ways: as nature (truth as science, scientism) and as tradition (truth as accumulated rules, morality, custom) - the precipitate of old judgments. To reawaken the capacity for judgment that knows itself as judgment, and thus to reconcile oneself to the world as a place we can feel at home in is a favourite theme of Arendt's. It is the opposite process to the one we have just described, and it occurs at the point at which the common understanding and its inherited wisdom is in a crisis, threatened by nihilism, and this is why genuine thinking must proceed 'without bannisters', in her phrase. And judgment will have to occur autonomously from theoretical reason, as what is at stake here is human meaning, the space in which intersubjectivity lets the human shine out. This may be epitomised as *judgment plus appearance in a political phenomenology*.¹⁴⁸

So disagreement can be taken as a sign that the interlocutor is a fully functioning member of the republic of taste, not that he must be brought into line with the supersensible (which as transcendental 'X' is unable to authorise any judgments).

¹⁴⁶ Villa is right to stress the way in which Arendt's judgment is neither that of *phronesis*, or of the community that seeks consensus through the application of rationality. But he is misguided, in my view, when he seems to suggest that judgment is thereby less political. See Villa in Hermesen and Villa, 1999 p. 10.

¹⁴⁷ But see Cascardi, *passim* in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997 for an account that claims that Arendt emphasises the beautiful/*sensus communis* in Kant, at the expense of the sublime (and its promise of radical transformation).

¹⁴⁸ See Villa, 1999 pp. 98-103 for an account that supports my view here.

Perhaps this will be interminable, but it need not be *de haut en bas* ('you have no taste, no cultivation, my dear fellow!'). Rather, the condition for the successful use of judgment would be the *agon*, the clash of opinions, and the attempt to 'see' the other as different but not alien. When Kant says 'we permit no one to hold a different opinion' we can suppose that by this he means that the judgment of the beautiful is not trivial, not 'private' taste, that it is important, vital to us (Rilke's 'you must change your life'), not the complacent report about 'how we are feeling' (the agreeable) or the legislations of the transcendental realm. We feel it on our pulse: we utter the judgment under the imperative of beauty. The other disagrees: what is the consequence, for us, of that? We might want to conclude that the point about the exercise of judgment is not that all will converge on the *same* judgments, but that the 'ideal standard' is just the ideal, the promise of an always to be deferred community. I *demand* agreement but I must *suffer* dissent.¹⁴⁹

Such a model for politics requires the 'radical' Arendt, not the conservative. If she is concerned that the space of politics should remain open, uncoerced by theoretical reason, then a better line on taste should be not that it is the cause or symptom of good judgment (pleasure as the sign of taste) but is contested — the arena in which we court both agreement and provoke disagreement. This would be a sign and safeguard of human plurality. But even this remains within a horizon of liberal, 'pragmatic' politics. A more radical take on the problem would bring into question the limits of the political itself, the way in which, for instance, liberal societies tend to depoliticise the role of the economic sphere, treating it as something given, like the seasons. To have already decided what it is legitimate to include as politics is to have policed the limits of what can be said or done; the messy dissensus of genuine politics, challenges all that.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ But see A Wellmer's 'Hannah Arendt on Judgment' in May & Kohn, 1996 for a more 'Habermasian' view of judgment and 'taste'. George Kateb, (in 'The Judgment of Arendt' passim in Beiner and Nedelsky 2001) sees Arendt's political judgment *as* a kind of aesthetic judgment. So for him, judgment is worryingly beyond good and evil, and modelled on the Kantian notion of taste. But as we've seen, this won't do: it does violence to what goes on in real politics (*dissensus*, not consensus), let alone what goes on when art comes under judgment. Perhaps taste is just a poor way of characterising both kinds of judgment.

¹⁵⁰ Again, the recent work of J Ranciere on the police/politics issue is relevant here.

The genuinely political has new judgments and actions that *challenge* the tradition also known as taste (a ‘taste’ that often appears as kitsch: an examples of moral kitsch might be the *Kirche, Kuche, Kinder* of ‘family values’ and ‘hard working families’ and the communities of affect generated by vote-seeking politicians and others).¹⁵¹ Arendt would have some warrant for this idea of politics as the challenge of the new in Kant’s notion of judgment as active appropriation of tradition (genius and taste). The exercise of a civic republican virtue, whether conceived in liberal or radical terms, already implies both the demand for, and failure to attain, consensus in judgments; final agreement is not on the agenda in this non-totalising sphere.¹⁵² Arendt shows herself alive to the importance of this in a number of her texts, for instance her essay on Lessing in *Men in Dark Times*, where she comments sympathetically on his preference for opinion over the coercion of final truth:¹⁵³.

Lessing, however, rejoiced in the very thing that has ever – or at least since Parmenides and Plato – distressed philosophers: that the truth, as soon as it is uttered, is immediately transformed into one opinion among many, is contested, reformulated, reduced to one subject of discourse among others. Lessing’s greatness does not merely consist in a theoretical insight that there cannot be one single truth within the human world but in his gladness that it does not exist and that, therefore, the unending discourse among men will never cease as long as there are men at all. A single absolute truth, could there have been one, would have been the death of all those disputes in which this ancestor and master of all polemicism in the German language was so much at home and always took sides with the utmost clarity and definiteness. And this would have spelled the end of humanity.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ See E Meade ‘The Commodification of Values’ for an insightful discussion of this issue. In Kohn & May, 1996 pp. 107-125

¹⁵² For a view of judgment as transformative and not merely bound to the criterion of validity, see L Disch, ‘Please Sit Down but Don’t Make Yourself at Home: Arendtian “visiting” and the Prefigurative Politics of Consciousness Raising’, in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997 pp. 132-159. See also Calhoun C, on promising and action without authority in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997, especially pp. 254-255.

¹⁵³ d’Entreves sees an unresolved tension between the agonistic and communicative aspects of Arendt’s theory of political action. But he over ‘Habermasianises’ Arendt: his neglect of reflective judgment as a form of political *poiesis* means that he misses the way in which judgment serves *doxa* not *logos*. See d’Entreves, 1994 chapters 2 and 3.

¹⁵⁴ ‘On Humanity in Dark Times’ in *Men in Dark Times*, p. 27. Written in 1959.

If we attend to what Arendt is saying here about Lessing, we catch the sense that she has of what it is to contend with others over what is important: *doxa*, not *logos*. There is no place here for a pre-existing truth, a political equivalent of Taste. The *sensus communis* is generated in and through the play of judgments; it does not authorise some judgments over others. This way of picturing judgment is at a distance both from Aristotelian *phronesis*, as political subjects do not have an already existing shared view of The Good. On the other hand, this emphasis on the public sphere and the duty to take responsibility for the shared public world isn't recourse to liberalism. Arendt's view of the effects of liberalism on the body politic is damning, as we shall see when we come to consider *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in the next chapter.

There are, though, circumstances in which one might conclude the other has no taste, where the other disqualifies himself from the community of judges (i.e., the citizens). But this would not occur in the event of a 'wrong' judgment, but where there is no judgment at all. The other might not transcend the judgment of sense, not make the imaginative effort to engage with different others. The symptom here would be the one who merely parrots the judgments of the past, or of the majority (as a dead dogma, as J.S. Mill describes it in *On Liberty*) and merely adapts him or herself to the situation, whatever it might be. In aesthetic judgment he is the philistine, in political judgment the bureaucrat. We have already met this type, in Arendt's negative exemplar: Adolf Eichmann.¹⁵⁵

The judgment of taste, then, may or may not occur. It thus cannot be the same as the judgment of the 'common human understanding', which is based in experience. Indeed, so far is it from being 'found everywhere' that Kant is led to ask

is taste an original and natural ability, or is taste only the idea of an ability yet to be acquired and therefore artificial?¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ And he has something in common with the inauthentic, with the 'bad faith' of Sartrean existentialism. See also Villa, 1999, pp. 103-106.

¹⁵⁶ Kant, *Op. Cit.* Para 22.

Kant's idea seems to be that taste is *cultivated*. Indeed, something like this would appear to be necessary if he is to give a credible account of how the same human race could produce two sorts of common sense: that which lies fallow must be cultivated.¹⁵⁷ We can place Kant's notion within a more general account of the diffusion of the enlightenment, initially restricted to the happy few who have at least the potential for exercising the judgment of taste, but eventually to be generally extended. Man is a progressive being: he can be educated into the use of the faculties that providence has endowed him with, albeit in an immature and undeveloped condition. Perhaps the enlarged mentality is something to be achieved; then the question would be whether all can or will develop this ability. Perhaps the common multitude will become capable of true judgment some time in the future.

This account is part of a philosophy of hope: 'progressive' and liberal in the sense that there is no fixed and unbridgeable gulf between the cultivated and the natural. When Arendt reads paragraph 40 of *The Critique of Judgment* she understands the 'enlarged mentality' as part of Kant's fundamentally democratic, republican understanding of judgment. However, her view of the 'common human understanding' and its relation to the *sensus communis* is complicated by her sense that we are living in the wake of a great catastrophe. For Arendt this catastrophe is *modernity*. Whatever Kant may have thought of the matter, for her the question is urgent because there has been a kind of Fall. As we shall see below, for Arendt common sense has been atrophied, or even lost, and the opinion of the multitude is no longer sound.¹⁵⁸ For her, as with Kant, the demand for judgment is made: not all can or will respond, but now it is because the common man has become *das Mann*: genuine plurality and the action that accompanies it has degenerated into the consumer society of the behaviourists, of *animal laborans* and the consequent eclipse of public space.

When Arendt writes from the point of view of natality and a revived

¹⁵⁷ Mere 'common human understanding' and the judgment of Taste as *sensus communis*.

¹⁵⁸ But see Hansen, 1993 Chapter 6 ('What is Thinking Politically?') for an account of common sense in Kant and Arendt that stresses its role as a source for radical social change in its very universality as a ground for judgment.

republican virtue, the problems of her reading of common sense as simply common human understanding are less apparent. But when she writes in the vein of mourning for a lost common sense some of the paradoxes of her reading of Kant become more evident.¹⁵⁹ Arendt gets into a tangle when she treats common sense/*sensus communis* as if it were a kind of quasi-natural substrate; but it can no more perform that role than can Kant's supersensible substrate. Judgment is no more authorised or grounded in anything in human nature than it is by a transcendental X. Nevertheless she is sometimes tempted to call for the presence of something that she acknowledges is lost – a paradoxical and essentially conservative appeal.

As Beiner notes, she translates the *allgemein* not as universal, but as general.¹⁶⁰ This way of translating the term is indicative and noteworthy.¹⁶¹ Arendt's reading of Paragraph 40 is that of a power of judging that would be exercised by some, not all, and whose scope would not include those who remain outside the public realm. But what of those left outside? They do not exercise the power of judgment as members of a *sensus communis*, and even their common sense as 'common human understanding' is in question. If we understand 'taste' as a cultivable faculty for recognising the beautiful, making the sound judgment, then the problem of the two groups recurs: those who actually use this natural yet somehow special faculty, and those who do not: the cultivated and the barbarous. Judgment comes to be a symptom of underlying similarity: those who judge the beautiful as we do, have taste (which we demand they should exercise), the others do not.

There is an optimism, and a hope, in Kant: history, as the great school that leads man on to the development of the powers now lying latent in the many. Common

¹⁵⁹ Hauke Brunkhorst approaches the elitist/egalitarian strains in Arendt's thought from an interesting angle: he traces her idea of freedom to (1) the Greco-Roman idea of the *polis/res publica* and (2) the Augustinian/Christian idea of the spontaneous new beginning. He sees the tension in Arendt's work –including the problematic issue of Arendt on social justice as well as her 'profounder insights about the nature of politics and freedom' –as stemming from this tension between two traditions in her work. See Brunkhorst, 'Equality and Elitism in Arendt' in Villa, (ed.) 2000, Chapter 9, pp. 178-198.

¹⁶⁰ *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 163, n 155.

¹⁶¹ See also 'The Crisis in Culture' in *Between Past and Future* where it informs her rather conservative account, but also *On Revolution* where it plays a role in her considerations on just who it is that plays an active part as a citizen or revolutionary.

human understanding/common sense will be cultivated into the capacity to play a full role in the *sensus communis*. 'They' will one day join with 'us' (the happy few). But the same attitude to taste can be given a conservative spin: the beautiful and the good are unrecognised by the many because their capacity for exercising even ordinary common sense has atrophied. The many are again the 'common multitude', exploited by the charlatan. Applied to the political context, the fallen common sense of the many is mere social behaviour; only the few can still judge aright.¹⁶² But even the right use of common sense is not the same as the power to judge - the 'enlarged mentality'. We saw that for Kant there is the equivocal sense that this is somehow present in all (one of the three maxims of common understanding), yet not identical with the exercise of common sense. It involves a two-step process: the operations of imagination and reflection in which we avow or disavow our initial feeling. As Arendt describes the process, the operation of the imagination makes the absent present to one's inner sense, which is 'discriminatory by definition: it says it-pleases or it-displeases.'¹⁶³ It is called taste because 'like taste it chooses' and then a second stage: 'one can approve or disapprove the very fact of its pleasing', the criterion for one's judgment being communicability.¹⁶⁴

Only if we follow this strain of Kant's and Arendt's thought can we confront the enigma of Adolf Eichmann, who did not think or judge, not because he failed to disavow his 'natural' feelings (disgust at what was being done) or who failed to possess some natural ability to experience the 'right' feelings, but who never took the imaginative and reflective steps which might have allowed him to transcend the bureaucratic and participate in human plurality, which is where ethics and politics begin.

¹⁶² See 'The Crisis in Culture' in Arendt, 1968 for this argument.

¹⁶³ See McClure 'The Odor of Judgment' in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997 on the it-pleases, it-displeases issue and political judgment. P 75.

¹⁶⁴ Arendt, 1982 pp. 68-9. On this issue and its implications for judgment in a political context see McClure, 'The Odor of Judgment' in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997 pp. 71-76. See also Bradshaw 1989 pp.94 ff – for an 'anthropologised' and somewhat superficial reading of Arendtian judgment, which nevertheless sees the mutual implication and distinction between common sense and judgment as important.

So we return to Eichmann. We recall that according to Arendt he did not think (in the non-instrumentalist sense of finding one's bearings and the meaning of what one is doing), and therefore could not judge. On the account just given we might say that he was found wanting here, not just because he disavowed his 'natural' feelings (in this case, disgust), nor because he was somehow missing a faculty to experience the 'right' feelings (that is, he lacked something called taste). Rather, he failed –*chose to fail* – to take the imaginative and reflective steps that would have enabled him to transcend the bureaucratic, careerist level of 'following orders' and which would have connected him to human plurality – the dimensions of ethics and politics.¹⁶⁵

These considerations connect Eichmann to the question of just what the common sense/*sensus communis* is supposed to be. If membership of the *sensus communis* is elective, if that is, one participates in it through the 'second stage' of approbation or disapprobation of one's pleasure or disgust, we might regard him as having chosen not to make that step by a kind of culpable omission. If so, how did it happen that he missed this stage? We return to the issue of what we can reasonably expect someone to possess (common sense/ordinary human understanding), and what we might demand of them – that they judge, discriminate, have or show 'taste'. We shall approach these considerations through Arendt's essay 'The Crisis in Culture' in *Between Past and Future*.

The Crisis in Culture

Here Arendt makes a fairly early (1960: around the same time as the Eichmann trial) presentation of Kant's notion of aesthetic reflective judgment. She connects judgment to politics in the context of a discussion of the consumer society as the devourer of the products of *homo faber*, the 'unnatural growth of the natural' etc., all themes she had raised in *The Human Condition* (1958), and which received a brief consideration in 'Understanding and Politics', as we've seen. Both art and politics are 'phenomena of the public world' (p. 218). Both need a

¹⁶⁵ See Clarke, 1980: Clarke connects judging to willing, and identifies an unwillingness to judge on the part of Eichmann.

public space in which they can be seen and each need each other as the ‘men of action’ protect the space in which art appears, while the art work provides the medium in which imperishable, useless beauty shines forth, bestowing beauty and immortality on the ‘fleeting greatness of word and deed’. Art is, among other things, the way in which human actions are memorialised. There is a reminder here that Arendt tends to see the *meaningful* as the *visible*, whether she is considering acting or making. The artist, as judge, casts a backward look at what has been done, and preserves it in a way that is *inter est*, between us, in public space. The judge must discriminate that which deserves to be remembered by the *polis*. Again the question of taste, and the possession of it, informs Arendt’s writing.

Arendt discusses the idea of the disinterested mind of the spectator as ‘so trained and cultivated that it can be trusted to tend and take care of a world of appearances whose criterion is beauty.’¹⁶⁶ This is ‘for lack of a better word’, taste. And taste takes us back to Kant, and the mobilisation of the imagination in the service of the enlarged mentality. Again we see the way Arendt views the faculty of judgment as elective and limited, stemming from the ability ‘to see things not only from one’s own point of view, but in the perspective of *all those who happen to be present*’.¹⁶⁷ ‘Present’, for Arendt, means present in public space, which she conceives of as a limited zone, bound by a metaphorical *polis* wall (that is: laws and constitutions) that distinguishes it from the obscurity of the private zone. All those are the ones who participate seriously by showing the willingness to enter public space to act, judge and speak with others. This will usually be a minority, and a small one at that, except in periods of momentous happenings (Germany 1918, Hungary 1956, Paris 1968, Poland 1980 etc), when we may speak of a *large* minority.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Arendt, 1968 p. 219.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 221 –my emphasis.

¹⁶⁸ See Bickford, ‘Propriety and Provocation’ in Arendt in Calhoun and McGowan 1997 pp. 85-95 for a discussion of the way Arendt conceives the plurality of ‘those who happen to be present.’ This is why Lyotard’s different reading of Kant on the meaning of ‘allgemein’ as all/universal is not so much incorrect as beside the point (Lyotard 1994, p.18). Arendt’s purpose is to situate judgment, and the enlarged mentality that enables it, in a finite space –whatever Kant may have meant. See chapter 6, where I return to this point at greater length.

So it seems again that we have two groups – those who judge and those who do not. This could be viewed in a number of ways: as realistic acceptance of the smallness of politics in most peoples lives (as a conservative like Oakshott might have it); a realism about the strenuous nature of sustained political engagement for people in general; or a kind of elitism that relegates ‘the people’ to a kind of shapeless mass, deprived of political agency, on whom the Vanguard or elite (Leninists, Jacobins or patrician *optimates*) will perform actions.

According to Arendt, ‘it is as though taste decides not only how the world will look, but also who belongs together in it.’¹⁶⁹ She concedes that in politics this may seem to be an ‘aristocratic principle of judging’, but, she adds, its significance is perhaps deeper than that. Judging shows forth to others who one is in a way that is distinct from the individual talents, knowledge and qualities that one has. She then goes on to make a most peculiar claim. It is worth quoting at length:

Taste...does not simply judge...quality. On the contrary, quality is beyond dispute, it is no less compellingly evident than truth and stands beyond the decisions of judgment, beyond the need of persuasion and wooing agreement, although there are times of artistic and cultural decay when only a few are left who are still receptive to the self evidence of quality. Taste as the activity of a truly cultivated mind – *culture animi* – comes into play only when quality consciousness is widely disseminated, the truly beautiful easily recognised; for taste discriminates and decides among qualities. As such, taste and its ever alert judgment of things in the world sets its own limits to an indiscriminate, immoderate love of the merely beautiful; into the realm of fabrication and of quality it introduces the personal factor, that is, gives it a humanistic meaning. Taste debarbarises the world of the beautiful by not being overwhelmed by it; it takes care of the beautiful in its own ‘personal’ way and thus produces a ‘culture’.¹⁷⁰

There are a number of characteristically peculiar statements in this passage. On the one hand Arendt tells us that quality stands beyond dispute, ‘compellingly self-evident’. This is a

¹⁶⁹ Arendt, 1968, p. 223.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 224. Note the echoes of Pericles’ funeral oration in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* Book 2.

claim about culture that could only seem self-evident to the most conservative of writers. Bluntly: how does she know this? It is being presented as a timeless truth. She then goes on to tell us that in certain periods in history most people become blind to this self evidence. Only the happy few respond to it. So it is possible for something obvious to be non-obvious: but it is hard to see what the criteria for recognising ‘quality’ could possibly be under such conditions. We must note that Arendt thinks she is talking, not about judgment, but about the objects that lie open *to* judgment. Some things are ‘evidently’ on the agenda for judgment, some not. Again: who decides? There is a parallel here between her distinction between the fabricated (the world, the *polis*, the laws) and that which appears, and between the ‘merely’ socio-economic and that which is proper to politics. These are different ways of expressing the same distinction. Her preoccupation with the ‘spatial’, with the bounded topos of freedom/judgment here leads her to forget that what or who shall stand in the space of appearances is itself a political question, or may become one. The space of the political should be thought of as finite and determinable, not pre-determined in its matter: for those who determine this in a democratic political order are the participants themselves. They cannot be policed. In the end, it comes to a question of what Castoriadis called the ‘project of autonomy.’¹⁷¹ Certain conservative and liberal strains of thought might well want to ensure that socio economic questions should stay off the political agenda. There is no reason for a radical to agree to this; no reason for one who wants to ‘think without bannisters’ to accept it either.¹⁷² Accepting that something we call ‘political’ should not be swallowed up by the discourse of economics is one thing; but it is quite another to delimit what we may consider when we are thinking, acting or judging politically. If judging is somehow elective, as Arendt contends, that is no reason to assume that the oppressed will not want to *make* that election.

The question is one of authority, of authorisation. Arendt’s tone of *de haut en bas* is

¹⁷¹ See Castoriadis, 1991, for example p. 6 –but this is the central theme of all his work.

¹⁷² And see Hinchman & Hinchman, 1994 p. 160 in further support of this point.

reminiscent of her discussion of the breakdown of common sense, from a vantage point apparently above or outside it. Here again the problem is that of the idea of “taste”. Taste implies the ‘happy few’, ‘an essentially aristocratic principle of organisation’, the effect of which is to defer or displace the locus of authority from the judges themselves as equals to some quality supposed to be residing in or beyond the happy few. This latter, as unlocatable other, is a mystification. To appeal to a ‘supersensible’ to ground judgment would be to take a backward step, akin to appealing to a Divine Guarantor, Immortal Legislator or platonic Noble Lie. And if we abolish the supersensible we are left with just the happy few themselves, with their claim to possess an authority beyond that of common human understanding. And this claim, too, becomes the subject of a critique: can taste provide a justification of authority in political judgment?

Taste discriminates in two ways. It distinguishes among things and between people: those we wish to associate with because they share our judgments, and those who do not because they judge differently. This is actually a double distinction, between those who judge and those who do not, *and* between judges who differ. It implies ‘friendly disagreement’ among the judges. If, according to Arendt, I would rather be wrong with Plato than right among his opponents,¹⁷³ must I fling the admirer of Pythagoras or Epicurus into the outer darkness of those who have no Taste?¹⁷⁴ One would not expect an admirer of Lessing to take such a view.

Whether or not Kant would have accepted such dissensus in the *sensus communis* – republican pluralism among the judges – this is the move Arendt needed to take to salvage

¹⁷³ C.f. *Between Past and Future* pp. 224-226.

¹⁷⁴ See Mewes, 2007 and Canovan in Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994 for some discussion of links between ‘high culture’ and the political realm.

something from ‘taste’ in republican political judgment.¹⁷⁵ And it still leaves the question of how to distinguish the elect from the rest, and whether it is possible to pass from one to the other in either direction. The alternatives to dissensus in judgment are both problematic: either a source of authority that transcends the judges, which seems dictatorial or theological,¹⁷⁶ or in the empirical majority (‘society’) where prejudice and manipulation hold sway.¹⁷⁷ Arendt’s instincts mainly urge her to a version of Kant’s *sensus communis*, in which a profoundly republican perspective urges mediation between the one and the many, the genius and the tradition through the care (*colere*, cultivation) of a space in which actors can make new beginnings, and judgment can be freed from its dependence on rule.¹⁷⁸ She seems convinced that there will only be a minority willing to do this work of judgment (this is one of the main conclusions in the final chapter of *On Revolution*), but surely that minority need not form itself as a one party state. This sort of space is open ended: it faces the future, the birth of the new, which is always the unpredictable and unknown to the Law.¹⁷⁹

The best explanation for the line Arendt takes in ‘The Crisis in Culture’ in particular and *Between Past and Future* in general may lie with her quasi-Heideggerian preoccupation with the occlusion of the public space of appearance in a corrupted modernity.¹⁸⁰ “Quality-consciousness”, like the truths of common sense, are what we have where there is a sense of a shared space, reality, stability guaranteed by determinate judgments as the precondition for future reflective judgments. Quality appears ‘before’ we judge; it shows up (is revealed: *aletheia*)

¹⁷⁵ See Gottsegen, 1994 p 148 and pp. 230-234.

¹⁷⁶ And there is no Kantian warrant for this, as we have seen: the ‘X’ of the supersensible cannot ‘authorise’ anything.

¹⁷⁷ There is a suggestive parallel here with the problem of the General Will versus the Will of All in Rousseau. Or in something similar –the norms of the community that are the ground for Aristotelian *phronesis*. See Gottsegen, 1994 *passim* for an attempt to synthesise the neo-Kantian and neo-Aristotelian aspects of Arendt’s thought. I am less optimistic that he is that this possible. He summarises his aspirations in this direction on pp. 230-234.

¹⁷⁸ We might want to think of the *sensus communis* as shattered and unavailable to us, with reflective judgment as staking a wager on a new *sensus communis*. On the idea of a ‘lost’ *sensus communis*, see McClure in Calhoun and McGowan, 1997 pp. 28-52.

¹⁷⁹ Hansen, 1993, argues both that Arendt has a political ontology and that her outlook on plurality and natality is compatible with ‘what might broadly be called a left politics (although she herself was no “leftist” or “progressive”’) (pp. 4-5).

¹⁸⁰ See Villa, 1995, *passim* for a long discussion of the relationship.

in a world not yet submerged by the getting and spending of *animal laborans*. Arendt is hesitant about the idea of the creation of quality criteria because it looks too much like the creation of values, a hubristic voluntarism or projective stance about what shall be the Good and the Beautiful typical of a certain modern subjectivism.¹⁸¹ She inclines to the view that quality lies in what shows up for us: it is not in our gift to decide criteria – rather it is the slow work of time, or of Being as revealed in history.

The trouble with all of this is that it is inconsistent with her earlier insight that in the wake of the shattered traditions of the past we are free to think and judge anew.¹⁸² She should have said: “that is what quality was *for them*: we shall see what it shall be *for us*”. Quality ‘appears’ in all phenomena, because nothing shows up for us as neutral; but what will count as ‘quality’ (whatever concerns our normative judgments) cannot be determined in advance as there is no particular reason to suppose that the things that make up a world will look the same as they did to our predecessors.¹⁸³ If they did, it would make nonsense of Arendt’s stress on the ability of people to make a new beginning.¹⁸⁴

By adopting the line she does here she repeats the Kantian phenomenal/noumenal ‘gap’, only this time as ontic/ontological. Earlier we saw that the noumenal remains an empty site of impotent authority, something to be gestured at as the ‘ungrounded ground’ of taste; here in her Heideggarian voice the merely ontic (the actually existing people and things of the world) becomes subject to That Which Reveals Quality, a kind of historical fate that reveals different horizons for the disclosure of Being. Arendt’s better insight is that of the plural perspectives of

¹⁸¹ One might think of Sartrean Existentialism in this context, or of the way in which market thinking comes to permeate all other discourses.

¹⁸² And see Leonard on this point in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997, especially pp. 335-336.

¹⁸³ My reading of reflective judgment as creative and futural in Arendt is clearly at odds with that of Cascardi, who thinks of her as rather ‘Habermasian’ and overly concerned with the beautiful, rather than the transformative potential of the sublime. See Cascardi ‘Communication and Transformation: Aesthetics and Politics in Kant and Arendt’ in Calhoun & McGowan, 1992 pp. 99-131.

¹⁸⁴ See Taminiaux, ‘Time and the Inner Conflicts of the Mind’, p. 58 in Hermsen & Villa, 1999 for a good account of the way judgment escapes the coercion of the past and its *sensus communis*.

the finite beings who together judge and act in a shared world, a world which is entirely phenomenal and not in some way beyond/above human judgments. The question rather becomes one of how judgment will be delivered from arbitrary ‘free play’ – from the postmodern, from nihilism. Once subjects are installed at the centre of judgment, the task becomes one of how to think their self-regulation in space and time.

That which is cultivated ‘has its roots in common sense.’¹⁸⁵ In the Kantian conception of judgment the world of appearances is not simply objective and other to the subject, but is in part the product *of* that subject. The shared world of the common human understanding, which as Arendt reiterates, is reality for us, is itself part of the obscure intercourse which is judgment. The new happens as a meeting of mind and not-mind (‘nature’), which makes an ordered scene, the world, the *topos* for judgment. We are thus always already succeeding and preceding judgments – the world we find ourselves in is in part the product of judgment, while the future is a possibility, open to the creation of the absolutely new. The types of judgment blend into each other, beyond or behind the schema and symbol. Phenomenology is important to Arendt’s Kantian account of judgment because for her we judge in a world of appearances which is itself produced *by* that mysterious power of ‘estimating’ (*Beurteilung*)¹⁸⁶ Reflective judgment recalls us to our power, our dignity, as judges of what in the world shall lie between us, and what should be cared for.

Judgment in a post-enlightenment political setting should be responsible and expressive and is essentially plural. Reflective judgment should know itself *as* judgment, as the power of estimating. For Arendt, it implies taking responsibility for what shall appear among and between us. It thus emphasises intersubjectivity and obligation. Thus failure to judge is failure to engage in the project of ‘world making’, which since the enlightenment has been increasingly self-aware.

¹⁸⁵ Arendt, *Op. Cit.* p. 221.

¹⁸⁶ Kant, 1928 Para. 9.

Post enlightenment judges, having cast off tutelage, are supposed to know themselves as makers of laws and constitutions – not mere receivers of the Law. This may involve a kind of vertigo or nausea for even, or especially, the most revolutionary actors, as the idea that one is creating and not just restoring or repeating something can be hard to bear. Arendt's point in 'The Crisis in Culture', as elsewhere, is that judgment transcends what appears, choosing from among appearances, among judges, and takes responsibility for that choice. In doing this it shows who one is: 'the one who becomes manifest'. It will not be coerced by beauty or even truth. This is the crucial part of Arendt's take on judgment as a form of political existentialism, which we could also call a political phenomenology. Judgment reveals a world and it reveals the one who judges to her fellows.¹⁸⁷

Thus Lessing was an attractive figure for Arendt as he was an example of the cultivated human judge, who:

Was a completely political person, he insisted that truth can only exist where it is humanised by discourse, only where each man says not what just happens to occur to him at the moment, but what it is he deems "truth". But such speech is virtually impossible in solitude, it belongs to an arena in which there are many voices and where the announcement of what each "deems truth" both links and separates men, establishing in fact those distances between men which together comprise the world. Every truth outside this area, no matter whether it brings men good or evil, is inhuman in the literal sense of the word...Because it might have the result that all men would suddenly unite in a single opinion [...] as though not men in their infinite plurality, but man in the singular... were to inhabit the earth.¹⁸⁸

If that occurred, Arendt continues, it would mean the abolition of the world, because it

¹⁸⁷ For a critical discussion of the way in which Arendt went about this in practice – the 'Little Rock' controversy - see *Hiding From History* M Steele, 2005, chapter 4.

¹⁸⁸ *Men in Dark Times* pp. 30-31. Stephen T Leonard (like perhaps Richard Bernstein) seems to think that the key exemplars Arendt presents us are limited to Heidegger and Eichmann, or maybe adding Socrates. Leonard should have considered Lessing before making this claim; and maybe the rest of *Men in Dark Times*. See Leonard in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997, p.334-335 and Bernstein, 297-332.

is only in the interspaces between us that a world can appear. Lessing, for Arendt, was the great example of someone who preferred opinion to philosophic truth. He loved the world in this sense, more than just being right.¹⁸⁹ Another model for this approach is Machiavelli, who cared more for his city than his own soul.¹⁹⁰ And Arendt shares Machiavelli's distrust of the role of moral goodness when it comes to the care of the world: civic virtue implies the *vita activa*, not the salvation of one's own soul.¹⁹¹ Such reflections by Arendt reveal a sensibility that has taken seriously the demand that we have a shared responsibility to defend the spaces in which humans reveal themselves through judgment and action as political subjects. These are the fruits of a long meditation on what has come to threaten that shared world.

Arendt was aware that there was an example of a very different attitude close to her: Martin Heidegger. Much as she was influenced by his work (sometimes, as we have seen, not necessarily for the better) the core of her political philosophy implies a direct repudiation of his approach to the world.¹⁹² The problem lies with the manner in which the enlightened one – philosopher, sage or mystic – can represent a threat to the human interspaces of the city. The lonely philosopher who returns to Plato's cave full of surprised wonder at what he has seen can become the friend to tyrants: he has seen the Truth, that which is revealed, and will have it enforced against the world of mere opinion. He has seen the Truth and is *above* judgment. But phenomenology without (reflective) judgment implies a failure to care for a world conceived as the fragile walls that encircle the space of human plurality. This is a kind of thinking without responsibility, the *vita contemplativa* that stands over and above the *vita activa* – an attitude as old as the philosophical tradition.

¹⁸⁹ See Villa, 1999 p. 98-103 for an account of judgment in the context of *doxa*.

¹⁹⁰ See *On Revolution*, p. 37.

¹⁹¹ In the light of these passages, we can see that George Kateb's view of Arendtian judgment, as a kind of pure 'aesthetics' – politics for politics sake – is misguided. Arendt cares about judgment as part of *doxa* because she cares about political truth, which needs a plurality, and for the sake of *amor mundi*. It's not a kind of art for art's sake, despite some passages cited by Kateb that might seem to support that reading. I'd suggest that Kateb's one-sided reading arises from insufficient attention to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and to Arendt's confrontation with the phenomenon of Eichmann. See Kateb, p.122 and *passim* in Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001.

¹⁹² But see S.T. Leonard on this. He stresses the damaging influence, as he sees it, of Heidegger on her work, especially her conception of thinking and its relation to the political: pp. 323-336 in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997.

Not Thinking, not Judging, not Acting

The other, more common, failure stems from failure to *rise* to judgment. Adolf Eichmann stands as the paradigm for this kind of non-judge, a ‘negative exemplar’.¹⁹³ The lonely thinker lost the world because he thought he was above it, but the Eichmann type fails even to reach up to it.¹⁹⁴ He is not ‘above’ the law but just follows its commands, whatever they may be. This kind of creature, Arendt implies, follows the breakdown of the tradition, and is symptomatic of modern nihilism, and not just totalitarianism – the ‘banality of evil’ thesis.

Some critics have argued that terms like ‘banal’ do not properly engage with the sadistic, perverse currents in the Nazi practice of industrialised mass death.¹⁹⁵ There is something in this. Rudolf Hoss, Commandant of Auschwitz, for instance, in all his protestations of normality (‘I am completely normal. Even when I was carrying out the task of extermination I led a normal family life and so on’),¹⁹⁶ claimed to be a traditionalist, deeply committed to ‘family values’:

I had been brought up by my parents to be respectful and obedient towards all grown up people, and especially the elderly, regardless of their social status. I was taught that my highest duty was to help those in need. It was constantly impressed on me in forceful terms that I must obey promptly the wishes and commands of my parents, teachers, priests etc., and indeed of all grown up people, including servants, and that nothing must distract me from this duty. Whatever they said was always right.¹⁹⁷

Family values, indeed. But we do not have to accept his self- account, any more than we

¹⁹³ For Eichmann as ‘negative exemplar’ for Arendt, see Lara 2007, Chapter 4, *passim*. Lara’s account is much concerned to connect reflective judgment to disclosure when considering evil. See also d’Entreves, 1994 pp. 107-8.

¹⁹⁴ Barry Clarke indicts Eichmann as an individual who is *unwilling* to judge See Clarke, 1980, p 437.

¹⁹⁵ See Žizek’s discussion of evil, for instance, in his first appendix to *The Plague of Fantasies*, 1997.

¹⁹⁶ Fest, 1970 p. 415.

¹⁹⁷ Fest, 1970 p. 421.

would that of any mass murderer. Yet when we come to view the experience of Europe 1933-45 it will surely not do to describe the Nazi atrocities entirely in terms of perversion, sadism and psychopathy. Millions of people made it happen, or let it happen – they did not think, judge or act. This is why Eichmann remains an exemplary figure.¹⁹⁸ As we know, there were the frightening beasts, the Hoss or Mengele types, but Arendt's intuition that something had been revealed in the Eichmann trial remains convincing, if only because it connects so well with our experience of modern, routine, bureaucratised life. The question remains, however: how could such an enormity have happened? Arendt has part of the answer: 'evil had lost the quality by which most people recognise it – the quality of temptation'.¹⁹⁹ The Nazi system had installed 'thou shalt kill' as the injunction one's conscience was supposed to follow, even though it went against most people's 'normal' morality, as Himmler and others recognised.

If we reject the idea that the Nazi system was run mainly by psychopaths and perverts we must assume that it was the work of 'normal' people. And if we accept *that*, then 'normality' becomes part of the problem: some of the grotesquery of a Hoss stems from his description of himself as a 'normal man' with a 'normal childhood'. Hoss, commandant of Auschwitz, had had an upbringing of a 'traditional' kind; of course it was also, as Fest points out, based on the kind of educational principles that would seem 'almost as if deliberately intended to set him on his subsequent path as commandant of Auschwitz'.²⁰⁰ The horror included the *credibility* of Hoss' claim that 'I am completely normal' and so on.

Arendt's point is that the 'voice of conscience' left most people defenceless against the New Order. Once all the legal signs were pointing in the reverse direction, so to speak, those

¹⁹⁸ See Parvikko, 2008 *passim* on his place the modern attempt to think the unthinkable –the holocaust.

¹⁹⁹ Arendt, 1968, p. 150.

²⁰⁰ Fest, Op. Cit. p. 420.

who would not judge because they had not thought went along with the new Nazi legality. As we shall see in the next chapter, determinate judgment – which is what most people rely on most of the time – implies a tradition, history. Arendt's point is that the tradition was smashed, and that without the kind of thinking that orients one and prepares the way for judgment by the individual what was left was 'following orders'. Arendt's thesis has a distinctly existentialist flavour here: what most people had not been ready to do was think and judge together, because the public space had been pulverised; now the crisis was upon them only a few could do it at all.²⁰¹ The Nazi/Stalinist regimes were, this means, the culmination and not the simple cause of the loss of judgment and meaning in the modern world. The 'banality of evil' thesis had to do with a kind of failure, which was nothing to do with feeble mindedness. As Arendt later reflected in her *The Life of the Mind*, regarding Eichmann:

The deeds were monstrous, but the doer.. was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specifically evil motives...only... something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but thoughtlessness.. He functioned [well] under the Nazi regime but , when confronted with situations for which such routine procedures did not exist, he was helpless, and his cliché-ridden language produced...a kind of macabre comedy. Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardised codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognised function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time we would soon be exhausted; Eichmann differed from the rest of us only in that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.²⁰²

The question Arendt went on to pose was:

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or attract attention, regardless of results and specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men

²⁰¹ See Hinchman & Hinchman, 1994 on this issue, pp. 143-179.

²⁰² Arendt, 1978, p. 4-5.

abstain from evil doing, or even actually “condition” them against it? ²⁰³

What kind of evil is she thinking of here? Again, no amount of thinking is likely to act as a prophylactic against the sadist. When we look at the recent mistreatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison, Iraq, the attempts to humiliate prisoners, the violence that was ‘excessive’ because it went beyond the ‘rational’ degrees deemed necessary for the extraction of information, might lead one to doubt Arendt on this point. But if we pay attention to the chain of command that administered the systematic treatment there and in Guantanamo Bay, at the bureaucratic regime/system that installs a routine that deprives individuals of any legal existence, that organises ‘extraordinary rendition’ and that ‘disappears’ people we are clearly dealing with something that is far more systemic than the violence of a few perverts. Between those at the top who give the orders and those who physically do the dirty work lie layers of those who ‘just follow orders’. Part of being ‘normal’ seems to include a widespread propensity to commit enormities when authority figures command them, as both our experience of recent history and numerous experiments by psychologists such as Milgram and Zimbardo have confirmed.²⁰⁴

But however much thinking and a self consciousness about the meaning of what one is doing may prepare the way for judgment, and then action, there can be no substitute, in Arendt’s eyes, for a public and plural world of judges as members of a *sensus communis*. Here she exceeds the individualism of post war existentialism, as she is aware that reliance on the heroic individual is not enough. A political ecology is indispensable for the preservation of thinking/acting/judging. It is in this emphasis on the public plural zone of life and the way it confers meaning on our contingent lives that Arendt is strongest, not in the metaphysics of taste and common sense.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ See S. Milgram, 2010 and P. Zimbardo 2007 *passim*.

In the 11th and 12th sessions of her lectures on Kant's notion of judgment, she comments on his idea of the 'backward step' of judgment, the 'operation of reflection' by which we approve or not the fact that something has pleased us.²⁰⁵ Gratification is transcended in the judgment of beauty (which is experienced as pleasure).²⁰⁶ If some of her remarks in *Between Past and Future* seem to pull her towards a sterile notion of Taste and Quality consciousness, others suggest that one can recognise beauty *and reject it* in a judgment of what matters to us; Arendt's strongest point was that we reveal *ourselves* and our affiliations in the act of judgment. If this is so, there can be no consensus on the beautiful, no stable *sensus communis* in the true republic.²⁰⁷

When Eichmann and Himmler, on different occasions visited the camps and overcame their 'natural' feelings of disgust when they saw what they had set in motion, what were they doing? Perhaps Eichmann was 'disapprobating his *disgust*' in a dissenting judgment? Not according to Arendt. She claims he did not judge at all. Arendt cites Kant's idea that the opposite of the beautiful is not the ugly, but that which excites disgust; for Arendt disgust is the sign of our 'innate repugnance to crime'. One can doubt this. Taste, like quality, is not well conceived in such terms, as what excites disgust is not unvarying throughout history and is to a degree contingent and empirical. Or perhaps Eichmann should have 'approved' his disgust and acted on *that* judgment – that what was happening was repugnant. But the point here is that self-evidence and the 'natural' have little to do with it if we are to accept Arendt's political existentialism. Judgments cannot be anchored, or authorised, in simple feeling. They will remain unauthorised and 'without banisters'. It is thus a mistake to refer to a naturalised taste (as feeling). This move merely loses the authority of the transcendental and replaces it with the uncertainty of the empirical – the facticity of 'nature' or 'tradition'. But this supposedly simple

²⁰⁵ Arendt, 1982. I return to these lectures, and this issue, in Chapter 6.

²⁰⁶ But see Kristeva 1999 pp.180-181 for a more psychoanalytically informed account of what is going on in the role of pleasure in judgment. Kristeva's account seems to miss the point of the moves Kant (and Arendt) make.

²⁰⁷ See Peg Birmingham, 'Hannah Arendt: the Spectator's Vision' in Hermesen & Villa, 1999 for a discussion of the way Arendt makes distinctions between making visible and judging. Birmingham argues (and I agree) that thinking/judging is part of worldliness, not a form of withdrawal.

facticity is the last thing the liberated judge ought to turn to in order to ‘authorise’ her judgments. Reflective judgment, applied to a political context, *cannot* be authorised by any other source than the judges themselves and certainly not by nature, culture or the transcendental. Arendt may not have dwelt long enough on the distinction between sensory feeling (of the natural man) and feeling consequent on a mental operation (of the judge when she employs imagination and reflection in a communicable judgment). If we *must* refer to feeling at all it would be the latter – the effect of judgment – that would be appropriate; but it might be better to abandon the term as unhelpful for Arendt’s purposes. ‘Taste’ is not a helpful category.²⁰⁸

One can place the historically accumulated wisdom of the human community as the standard for present judgment; but this is not a position that Arendt can take consistently as she is also acutely aware that there has been a breakdown of that tradition²⁰⁹. Even if that were not the case, to place the centre of authority in the empirical community is to lose the autonomy of the judging subject and place it at the mercy of society and its biases and prejudices.²¹⁰ Occasionally Arendt tries to combine nostalgia for the supposed authority of the tradition with her sense of its loss.²¹¹ She then attempts to speak to the present in the voice of the lost tradition, an oddly ventriloquial performance of mourning particularly in evidence in some of the essays

²⁰⁸ The ‘backward step’ of judgment is thus the way we disengage from the shared feelings and inherited mores of the community. Taste cannot be an authority because it is either potentially bogus (common sense) or it is revealed as a *possible agreement* – a kind of challenge, or wager for the future. The judge has not tuned in to the supersensible or some other higher faculty, but has signalled a way of seeing what is or could be. See Taminiaux, pp. 43-58 in Hermesen & Villa, 1999. C.f. also Ricoeur, *The Just* 1995: p100-101, ‘Hannah Arendt’s effort in her volume on judging...a wager, namely that it is finally more profitable to attempt to disengage conception of political judgment from the theory of the judgment of taste than to bind this conception to the theory of teleological judgment via a philosophy of history’. Ricoeur seems to think she does violence to Kant’s conception in attempting this; I’d applaud the attempt – Arendt’s remodelling of Kant for her own purposes seems to me to be perfectly acceptable. I just wish she had been more explicit and radical in this project. Judgment can be thought of as a way of discriminating the taste of others (see for instance Birmingham pp. 35-6 in Hermesen and Villa, 1999), as reflective judgment; one’s standpoint is not that of the others. This seems right, but then taste is not only non-coercive, but now plays a very minor role indeed, as something one examines and challenges.

²⁰⁹ But see Gottsegen, 1994, pp. 230-234 who still seems to think something on these lines should have been possible for Arendt.

²¹⁰ I take it that this is near the heart of Cascardi’s criticisms of Arendt in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997.

²¹¹ Arendt can certainly be seen, too, as a thinker much concerned with a tragic view of life. This need not be the kind of conservative mourning we have described above, of course. On Arendt and tragedy, see Pirro, 2001 *passim*. Judgment features especially in chapter 4.

of *Between Past and Future*. But this is not the best of her. That lies in her commitment to the public and plural world of judgment, in which reflective judgment appears, and in doing so, preserves meaning and prepares the future.²¹²

‘Understanding and Politics’

If we return once again to the essay ‘Understanding and Politics,’ we see that many of Arendt’s important themes had received an early extended treatment. This essay is worth our extended consideration because it shows us many of Arendt’s major preoccupations *before* she has begun to articulate them in Kantian terms. It also sheds light on the task she had completed earlier in the decade, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, giving us interesting insights into what she thought the different methodologies of the historian or scientist might be. ‘Understanding and Politics’ is thus a pivotal text, looking both forward to her preoccupation with judgment and back to the analytical narrative that is *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The piece has the difficult, circular and ‘resultless’ nature of thinking as its subject, a process that seems to inform the meditative, open-ended quality it has, seeming to circle around the problems, resisting the impulse to closure and result. In addition, we need to be sensitive to the particular context it was written in, which was nine years after the end of the Second World War, and in the middle of the ‘cold war’. Indeed, the concerns of that historical conjuncture mark most of the pages of this (and not only this) essay by Hannah Arendt. However, its interest transcends the particular concerns of 1954.

Almost all of her characteristic themes make at least a brief appearance in this essay, but I want to suggest that what is of central importance here is the way in which what

²¹² See Villa, 1999, Chapter 4. Villa argues something similar to this, i.e. that judgment allows us to *see*, rather than simply act. See also Birmingham p 40 in Hermsen and Villa, 1999.

gradually emerges is a conception of a free, productive, faculty that is deeply involved with the imagination. This faculty is 'the other side of action' and is a power possessed by the 'being whose essence is beginning'. It would be tempting to call this power 'reflective judgment', but we need to move cautiously here. To name this faculty too hastily is to bring the strange and the new under the sign of something we think we know already. Perhaps it is unnameable. It is strangely ambiguous even in Kant, and perhaps the value of reticence here is the insight that it means more than one thing at different times even (especially) in the *Critique of Judgment*. There is even the possibility that it might not be thought's highest aim to think a special kind of judgment, but rather to be reconciled somehow with that which transcends judgment: that which appears. I do not want to claim that this thought is explicitly articulated by Arendt, only that there is present in some of her texts a current that seems to lead in this direction. What is evident is that Arendt always thinks of judgment with a notion of its *topos*, the place in which the human appears in its uniqueness and plurality. Phenomenology and judgment meet here, the matter of being at home in a world that nevertheless needs to be changed. 'Understanding and Politics' is interesting because it shows that most of Arendt's concerns were in effect waiting for the Kantian terminology for their clearest expression. It also casts light on what she thought she had to do when she wrote about history.

Crucial to the way in which Arendt presents the process of understanding (a term that tends to do the kind of work for her that 'thinking' will later perform alongside 'judgment') is her use of the notion of 'common sense' in various texts. She uses this term in three ways: (1) *as a kind of substrate to judgment*: something natural, collective and spontaneous that links us with the 'real'. Failure to exercise this faculty on the part of the individual would be a kind of stupidity or perversion; (2) *the accumulation of judgments that form the 'traditional wisdom'*. This is something cultural and conventional,

but nonetheless essential if the individual is to live in a meaningful world, and received by that individual as a legacy. Failure to grasp and continue this tradition is again a kind of stupidity; (3) *an imaginative, creative capacity, linked to the ability to act freely*. This is something that orients us in the world of free contemporaries and endows it with meaning. It is somehow not dependent on the world of fact but it still transcends subjective caprice. This is a permanent possibility for 'the being whose essence is beginning.' Failure to judge here is the refusal to take up a place in the public world, failure to care for the world of appearances.

We need to look beyond 'Understanding and Politics' in order to see the full ramifications of this complex concept for Arendt, but some observations may be appropriate here. Like Kant, she shifts her use of the term to cover different meanings of 'common sense'. Judgment cannot be understood apart from it and it is important to grasp *which* meaning of common sense is being engaged: clearly the facticity of types (1) and sometimes (2) may lend themselves more readily to a conservative interpretation than (3) as there seems to be a clearer place in these first two for the exercise of authority, whether as nature or community. Type (3) of course resembles what Kant calls the *sensus communis* in clear distinction from mere common sense, and it is the collective expression of the employment of reflective judgment. As we have seen, this leaves open the question of the right employment of judgment.

It is also worth noting that Arendt does not seem to be interested in common sense as in any way constituted *by* ideology. Given her interest in Marx one might have expected her to examine the manner in which 'truth' is mediated by class and power, but this avenue of investigation is absent from the texts under consideration here. But if her conception of common sense is insufficient, as it surely is, it nevertheless plays a more ambiguous role for her than might be evident at first sight. It usually figures as a once

shared faculty that has been lost, or at least badly damaged. For Arendt, the common world that was inherited from the past has been in some sense *ruined* in the present in which she writes. Common sense, then, cannot now figure as a simple repository of 'the facts', in contrast to something else named as 'ideology', however much Arendt may be tempted to characterise it in those terms.

She *is* interested in something she names as 'ideology' but she uses the term in a particularly restricted sense: for her it is the kind of closed system of thinking that claims to explain the meaning and course of human history. What she names as 'totalitarian' regimes might appear to be the prime examples of the practical application of this kind of thinking, but it is important to see that for Arendt there is no simple dichotomy between the Nazi or Stalinist regimes on the one hand and the 'free world' on the other *as ways of thinking about humans in history*. To be sure, the nightmare of unfreedom represented by Soviet and Fascist states are not to be confused with the liberal democracies of the west. But her concern, as we shall see, is with a type of thinking that carries humanity into a rigorous, 'logical' and unfree 'thought world' that alienates us from the possibility of a contingent, unpredictable future which might be open to free human action. The hubris that declares that it has found the key to history, humanity and nature is not restricted to the 'totalitarian' ideologues, and nor are the frightening implications that flow from this belief. These include the use of science and technology to 'act into nature' and remodel humanity along 'logical' lines.

For Arendt, the important thing is the way in which we originate meaning in our world, the way we see pattern retrospectively, and can tell stories about that

pattern.²¹³ This view implies metaphor and art in our grasp of the real, not merely logic and science.²¹⁴ Arendt indicts modernity as a whole, not merely the totalitarian dictatorships. 'Ideology' merely names a dangerously extreme and destructive version of 'logical' thinking that has lost its moorings in lived experience. Thinking is ideological, for Arendt, when it loses its sense of itself as a way of seeing the world, and starts to claim for itself the exclusive ownership of the truth - supported by its own logic (promoted by the mental violence of indoctrination) and its power over human life (terror and liquidation). It eliminates plurality, erasing the potential for political and thus genuinely *human* life. For Arendt this must mean the presence of a shared reality (common sense) and the actions and judgments of those who care for the space of appearances.

Arendt begins her essay by outlining the processive, interminable character of what she calls understanding:

Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to try to be at home in the world. [...] Understanding is unending and therefore cannot produce final results.²¹⁵

Understanding gives rise to meaning, in contrast to 'indoctrination'. According to Arendt, indoctrination involves an attempt to 'short cut' the process of transcendence present in any authentic struggle to understand which it 'arbitrarily interrupts by pronouncing apodictic statements as though they had the reliability of facts and figures'.²¹⁶

²¹³ See Lara, 2007 *passim* on this, and chapter 4 in particular for reference to Arendt.

²¹⁴ This view of the value of metaphor and art has its roots in the difference between knowing things and finding meaning in them. Gottsegen thinks that for Arendt all political opinions are subjective and thus without 'truth value' or 'absolute validity' (P. 234). One wonders what conception of rationality *would* successfully ground political or aesthetic judgments. In my view this is to look for justification of judgment in the wrong place.

²¹⁵ 'Understanding and Politics', (1954) in Arendt, 1994 p. 308-9.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

This destructive perversion of true understanding is a kind of *violence*. Words become weapons in a fight, which degrades them to clichés mouthed by “‘experts’, who pretend to ‘understand’ factual information by adding a non scientific ‘evaluation’ to research results”²¹⁷

One might object here that Arendt has a naively positivist view of ‘the facts’ which, she says in her notes that preceded this essay, ‘must be enough’. There is indeed a strain of this sort of thinking in Arendt's work, which can surface damagingly in various places in her writing (in *On Revolution*, for example, where she takes it that technology is neutral and apolitical).²¹⁸ It is true that she writes here that what is needed is 'reliable information' rather than 'abstract rhetoric', but the reason given is interesting and transcends any crude positivism:

Facts must be enough; they can only lose their weight and poignancy through evaluation or moral preaching. *There no longer exists any accepted morality upon which sermons can be based and there does not yet exist any rule which would promote non-arbitrary evaluation.*²¹⁹

As this extract makes clear, Arendt isn't merely presenting a crude fact/value gap in which the 'facts speak for themselves': she places us in the wake of an historical catastrophe - the loss of our moral bearings - which has also deprived us of our capacity to make sense of the situation in which we find ourselves. One loss implied the other, because both understanding and what Arendt will come to name as judgment flourished in a world that each generation received as a tradition. When the tradition (already etiolated by industrialisation and secularisation) was pulverised by the modern experience of totalitarianism the crisis engulfed *all* the faculties: understanding, morality and judgment.

²¹⁷ Ibid. p. 309.

²¹⁸ This tendency may have its roots in Kant's compartmentalisation of knowledge, morality and aesthetics, a tendency effectively criticised by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1975).

²¹⁹ Arendt, Op Cit. p. 323 note 2. My emphasis.

The catastrophe has ‘exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment [...] it has deprived us of our traditional tools of understanding.’²²⁰ In this context, scientific and technical knowledge –‘the facts’- does not help us make *meaningful sense* of the world.

Note the way in which Arendt presents the problem and anticipates the future at once: the accepted morality has gone and 'there does not yet exist any rule' which would prevent our evaluations from being arbitrary. Arendt has moved characteristically quickly from a consideration of the ruin of the past to the possibility of invention in the future. This sense of being both belated and beforehand, too late and too early, is a theme that will run through much of her later work, a figure that stands somewhat equivocally for a specific crisis (understanding in the wake of the Twentieth Century totalitarianisms) and a metaphysical displacement (this is where thinking always finds itself). We are presented with the need to start again with our judgments. There is an antifoundational perspective here that can be related to her reliance on the encounter with phenomena through action, speech and judgment, and the withdrawal from it in thought.

We can already detect two characteristically 'Arendtian' equivocations here. Firstly, a difficulty about how to think about truth which sometimes wavers between a naively empiricist /positivist handling ('The facts must be enough') as opposed to an approach informed by a more sophisticated hermeneutics, and secondly a persistent difficulty about the status of her claims about understanding, judgment etc., as being transcendental or empirical. These problems, which are intimately connected, should not be understood as uniquely Arendtian weaknesses, as they are part of the complex 'knot' of

²²⁰ Ibid. p. 310.

judgment with which Kant struggled. Arendt wants both to remain true to phenomena while performing the critical and reflexive move that would enable her to oppose the forces that would degrade and eclipse the visibility of the public world. She needs to add judgment to the encounter with things as they appear.²²¹

There can be no simple continuity with the ways of the past:

...together with its evils, we think we have inherited the wisdom of the past to guide us through them. But the trouble with the wisdom of the past is that it dies, so to speak, in our hands as soon as we try to apply it honestly to the central political experiences of our time. [...] The wisdom of the past is inapplicable to our current crises not because of an utterly unprecedented development in western thought, but rather because it is the experience - the event, the catastrophe - of Twentieth Century totalitarianism that has rendered our tools of understanding useless. And although the process of understanding cannot provide us with immediate help in the struggle against the phenomenon of totalitarianism it is still a vital one as the process of understanding is....also a process of self understanding... which can make our efforts meaningful and prepare a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart...²²²

Arendt now proceeds to give some account of the way that understanding operates:

Understanding is based on knowledge and knowledge cannot proceed without a preliminary, inarticulate understanding. ...Understanding precedes and succeeds knowledge, Preliminary Understanding, which is at the basis of all knowledge, and true understanding, which transcends it, have this in common: they make knowledge meaningful.²²³

Thought, then, executes the hermeneutical circle: theoretical work must set out from an inescapable, shared and inarticulate background understanding. This preliminary

²²¹ It is helpful to recall, too, Arendt's sense of the distinction between *verstand* (intellect) and *vernunft*, (reason) between truth and meaning. See 'Existentialism Politicised' in Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994.

²²² Arendt, Op Cit. pp. 309-10.

²²³ Ibid. pp. 310-11.

understanding 'permeates as a matter of course, but not with critical insight, terminology and vocabulary'. Only if thought returns to the popular understanding from whence it started can it maintain the vital link between knowledge and understanding. Let us look again at this passage:

The sciences can only illuminate, but neither prove nor disprove, the uncritical preliminary understanding from which they start. If the scientist, misguided by the very labour of his enquiry, begins to pose as an expert in politics and to despise the popular understanding from which he started, he loses immediately the Ariadne thread of common sense which alone will guide him securely through the labyrinth of his own results. If, on the other hand, the scholar wishes to transcend his own knowledge - and there is no other way to make knowledge meaningful except by transcending it - he must become humble and listen closely to the popular language...²²⁴

The possible conservative implications of the above are clear. It would seem as if thought must not contradict the popular voice. But thought must perform a critical turn: the popular understanding, saturating 'scientific' thought with its intuitions will tend to cover up the new with the old. True understanding is effected by 'illuminating' the darkness in which popular understanding and scholarship are enveloped. In a reflexive move, thought orients itself in the world because it goes back to (and refuses to relinquish) that which the preliminary understanding blindly encountered at the start - a genuinely new phenomenon - and then sought to bury under an avalanche of 'facts'. Unless thought can transcend the realm of fact, information, data, it will remain trapped by the interpretative mesh that the popular understanding will weave for it:

...confronted by something frighteningly new, our first impulse is to recognise it in a blind and uncontrolled reaction strong enough to coin a new word; our second impulse seems to be to regain control by denying that we saw anything new at all, by pretending that something similar is already known to us; only a third impulse can lead us back

²²⁴ Ibid. pp. 311.

to what we saw and knew in the beginning. It is here that the effort of true understanding begins.²²⁵

The popular understanding is changed by the new - the new word is coined - but that same understanding is unwilling really to accept that something radically novel has occurred, and so it treats the new word as a synonym for things it has named in the past. 'Science' is part of this covering over process because its methods 'submerge whatever is unfamiliar and needs to be understood in a welter of familiarities and plausibilities'. Arendt goes on to quote Nietzsche's remark to the same effect: 'Science...is inspired by the instinct to reduce the unknown to something which is known'

Thought begins and ends in the popular understanding, but it is changed by its odyssey. True understanding can only commence when thinking turns back on itself. This call for a critical turn on thought's behalf, which will initiate the process of true understanding, is, of course, reminiscent of both the Kantian and Freudian projects. Thought orients itself, it engages in self-critique. Arendt wants thought to remain true to a common world, but she also wants it to transcend that world in order to operate freely. The popular mind has its virtue, it can recognise the new event, but it does this in a 'blind and uncontrolled' manner; a control regained through denial: mere knowledge makes the new look like the old. Just when the 'experts' think they are making progress they are at their most unfree - in the grip of mere opinion, of the past. Only if the thinker can go beyond this stage, in a move that is actually a turn backwards, can reality be regained. This is because the second stage - the scientific approach - merely 'deduces methodically the unprecedented from precedents' and therefore moves ever further away from the new event that has changed our world. Paradoxically, the popular understanding provides the impetus for flight into airy speculation via the accumulation of data. Only the critical move can somehow put expert knowledge in its right relation to common understanding.²²⁶

Arendt is not yet ready to confront the problem of how such a critique could be

²²⁵ Ibid. p. 325, note 8.

²²⁶ Ibid. p. 313. We see here an interesting view about the reliability of the 'popular mind' and 'the thinker' or the expert. Note that it is not a question here of a simple distinction between a ruined common sense and a special knowledge or faculty possessed by an elite.

possible. What could be the grounds on which thought could legislate for common understanding and 'science'? Where would it derive its authority or its criteria? How can it free itself sufficiently to act as a judge of its own presuppositions and prejudices? Arendt's rather vague use of 'understanding' and 'judgment' in this essay indicate the relatively undeveloped stage of her thinking around this problematic, but we can see now how Kant, especially the Kant of the 3rd critique, would become increasingly important to her. For the form in which Arendt will develop the problem will be in terms of judgment. There is also the question of how the genuinely new comes to be grasped in any sense by the 'common understanding.' Thought is supposed to return to that which was recognised, but how do we 'recognise' the completely unprecedented? It seems here as if we must make a distinction between recollection (*anamnesis*) and recognition (*anagnoresis*).²²⁷ The former is indeed conservative: we return to that which we already knew in a re-experiencing of the old through similarity (what Deleuze calls a 'bad repetition'); in the latter the genuinely new is recognised as different but related to what went before through a kind of creative jolt or shock (*anagnoresis* relates to the denouement in drama).²²⁸ We might call this latter the true, or good repetition. Our creative engagement with the new is only possible because we can rethink the past in the light of the present. This implies a faculty that exceeds the law that we inherit from the past. This should remind us of the genius, undetermined by rule, but disciplined by the very Taste that she modifies. But all thought in this key is troubled by what it attempts: the 'double take' of the critical turn, which would correct the place it started from, 'common human understanding', corrupted by the charlatan, the advertiser, the ideologue and the scientist. Reason departs on its round trip in order to recall us to ourselves, its authority acquired apparently, *en route*.

²²⁷ See Geoghegan, 1996, p. 37 for a brief but illuminating discussion of these terms.

²²⁸ Deleuze, 1994 *passim*.

To return to the essay, we now see 'judgment' making a brief explicit appearance. Arendt moves on to consider the possibility that the task of understanding may have become hopeless in the wake of the annihilation of our 'categories of thought and our "yardsticks" of judgment', *or* that in fact nothing can occur that would escape the grasp of the common understanding and its categories (Arendt rather confusingly appears to conflate briefly these two quite different possibilities, neither of which she wants to accept).²²⁹ If the latter is the case, then

Is not understanding so closely related to and inter-related with judging that one must describe both. as the subsumption (of something particular under a universal rule) which according to Kant is the very definition of judgment, whose absence he so magnificently defined as 'stupidity', an 'infirmity beyond remedy.'²³⁰

This very stupidity, Arendt goes on to claim, has become widespread in the current century.²³¹ We 'need to transcend both preliminary understanding and the strictly scientific approach' because 'we have lost our tools for understanding.' This loss stems from the breakdown of our 'common inherited wisdom', a loss of common sense. Arendt seems to want to embed the problem of true understanding firmly in the context of the modern world, and it seems difficult to be clear here as elsewhere in the essay how to differentiate the transcendental problem of judgment from the current social and political problem of the modern period. But this is a productive interpenetration. In what follows Arendt describes a world in which stupidity has become the rule; she mentions the ascendancy of advertising and psychotherapy as presumably classic examples of modern gullibility. It may be difficult to tolerate the intermittent tone of *de haut en bas* that Arendt tends to adopt when she discusses 'mass (American?) culture' (reminiscent of Adorno at his most mandarin), and to avoid engaging in

²²⁹ Arendt, Op. Cit. p. 313.

²³⁰ Ibid. p. 313.

²³¹ See Villa 1999, p 100

the *tu quoque* rejoinder that her assertion that none are exempt from the descent into stupidity seems to invite. But we should make the effort, as the essay shows an early sign of a conception of the human capacity to create something new in the world, a faculty generative of meaning that she will come to stress as absolutely central to the quest to create a world in which humans can feel at home. But it is unable to bring forth anything in the current malaise:

Our quest for meaning is at the same time prompted and frustrated by *our inability to originate meaning*. Kant's definition of stupidity is by no means beside the point. Since the beginning of this century, the growth of meaninglessness has been accompanied by a loss of commonsense²³².

A kind of barrenness afflicts us, one that both preceded and followed the catastrophes of fascism and Stalinism:

What has happened to the clever rules of self-interest has happened on a much larger scale to all the spheres of ordinary life, which, because they are ordinary, need to be regulated by customs. Totalitarian phenomena which can no longer be understood in terms of common sense and which defy all rules of 'normal', that is, chiefly utilitarian, judgment are only the most spectacular instances of the breakdown of our common inherited wisdom. From the point of view of common sense, we did not need the rise of totalitarianism to show us that we are living in a topsy - turvy world, a world where we cannot find our way by abiding by the rules of what was once common sense. In this situation, stupidity in the Kantian sense has become the infirmity of everybody, and therefore can no longer be regarded as "beyond remedy". Stupidity has become as common as common sense was before.²³³

If common sense is something that has passed away from intellectual and non intellectual alike then *of course* it will be difficult to see anything 'from the point of view of common sense'. Perhaps we can best capture a sense of what this might mean

²³² Arendt, Op. Cit. pp. 313-4. My emphasis.

²³³ Ibid. p. 314.

if we think of the problem as that of anachronism: what was appropriate yesterday for dealing with the world becomes utterly unserviceable when the world changes. It becomes stupid. What we can recognise and respond to in passages like this is, I want to argue, the sense that what has been lost beyond retrieval in the epoch of modern nihilism comprehends an entire culture and frustrates all the Kantian faculties: not just moral 'values', but a world of meaning, a common world. Arendt will come to name this as a paralysis of judgment, brought about by an inability to think (what she called 'understanding' in 'Understanding and Politics'). A catastrophe on this scale will require more than nostalgia for the received wisdom of the past, and it will not be possible to invoke common sense as the bearer of that wisdom in the modern world, because it has been rendered invalid by the impact of the Twentieth Century. What is crucial here is the way one understands the term 'common sense', either as the collective wisdom of a culture or as a critical, public, and creative capacity of humanity, the *sensus communis*. It is not a simple matter of either/or, however. The wisdom of the past represents the precipitate of the judgments of the past, which appear to us now as shattered Law; but they must have had their origin in previous judgments, which would have been underdetermined by law. The hope for the future is that the power we had to originate meaning through judgment remains, and that the crisis is a kind of opportunity to expose the springs of human imagination and creativity. This is the radically anti-conservative message that, it seems to me, Arendt delivers almost in spite of herself.

About half way through the essay, Arendt invokes Montesquieu and endorses his distinction between law and custom. It is interesting and characteristic that she should do this. For Arendt it is the *public* political realm that is crucial, and law establishes this. The social realm is established by customs (*mores*, morality), in the former we have the citizen,

in the latter, the individual, 'man':

The downfall of nations begins with the undermining of lawfulness, whether the laws are abused by the government in power, or the *authority of their source becomes doubtful and questionable*.²³⁴

When this happens, the people cease being citizens and as private individuals merely conform to tradition, the *mores* of the society which have now lost their foundation. As time passes, the customs and morality of the society are exposed to the blind contingencies of history. Under the impact of events they start to come apart at the seams. This concern on Arendt's part for the edifice of law that humans build to define and protect a space where they may act together as citizens, its vulnerability to the inevitable ruin of time, and the question of authority' are all themes to be taken up in subsequent works. But the political realm always has precedence over the social in Arendt that is in some ways problematic. The former is the visible space of freedom and action, the latter the private darkness of necessity and 'behaviour'.²³⁵ So while her meditations on these themes do support the view that she has a tragic vision of humanity's struggles, they can also support a reading of Arendt as conservative thinker. This is particularly evident when she mourns the loss of authority that was the prelude to the dissolution of the 'inherited wisdom.'

It was 'that radical change in the world which we call the industrial revolution' that dealt the death blow to the customs and traditions, 'the mere binding force of morality'. The political framework had lost its underpinning authority, with the effect that the 'great change'

²³⁴ Ibid. p. 315. My emphasis.

²³⁵ On behaviour versus action, see Hinchman & Hinchman, 1994 p. 156.

overtook a society which, although it was still able to understand and to judge, could no longer give an account of its categories of understanding and standards of judgment when they were seriously challenged... [and now] the very framework within which understanding and judging could arise is gone²³⁶

With the great change came the gradual loss of common sense, defined here as 'that part of our mind and that portion of inherited wisdom which all men have in common in any given civilisation'.²³⁷

But this is not the worst we have to endure: apart from the growth of meaninglessness and proliferation of stupidity we are threatened by the prospect of 'the loss of the *quest* for meaning and need for understanding', a threat that was also foreseen by Montesquieu. Here we seem to have a change of emphasis towards a real distinction between common sense and *sensus communis*: the frustration of a human capacity for creative thought (we have already seen that Arendt recognises the creative, originating quality of the 'quest for meaning': it isn't just 'out there' to be found.) Common sense gave us a world we could live in: to lose it is to lose the past; the *sensus communis* is the imagined plurality of judging subjects, where meaning and a kind of love or reconciliation with the human condition is generated: to lose this is to lose the future.²³⁸

In the place of the moribund 'common sense' (however defined) we see truth now grasped as 'stringent logicity'. Logical thinking is the other capacity common to us all apart from common sense²³⁹. The problem here, according to Arendt, is that logicity alone takes us away from the common world in which political action occurs: it 'severs its ties to reality and experience altogether' with its schizoid chatter. Totalitarianism merely

²³⁶ Arendt, Op. Cit. p 316.

²³⁷ Again, note how common sense has receded. The chief opposition is not between an extant common sense and a deceitful ideology, but between a ruined faculty and a radical way of thinking and making the new.

²³⁸ And a sense of the real, according to Curtis 1999. See especially pp. 13-22.

²³⁹ See K McClure 'The Odor of Judgment' on logicity, common sense and judgment e.g. pp. 78-9 in Calhoun & McGowan, 1997

presented us with a particularly grotesque and extreme version of an omnipresent phenomenon. In distinguishing between the two 'capacities' Arendt attempts another partial definition of what she means by 'common sense':

...common sense presupposes a common world in which we all fit, where we can live together because we possess one sense which controls and adjusts all strictly particular sense data to those of all others; whereas logic and all self evidence from which logical reasoning proceeds can claim a reliability altogether independent of the world and the existence of other people. It has often been observed that the validity of the statement $2 + 2 = 4$ is independent of the human condition, that it is equally valid for God and man. In other words, wherever common sense, the political sense par excellence, fails us in our need for understanding, we are all too likely to accept logicity as a substitute, because the capacity for logical reasoning itself is also common to us all. But this common human capacity which functions even under conditions of complete separation from the world and experience and which is strictly "within" us, without any bond to something 'given', is unable to understand anything and, left to itself, utterly sterile. Only under conditions where the common realm between men is destroyed and the only reliability left consists in the meaningless tautologies of the self-evident can this capacity become -productive", develop its own lines of thought, whose chief political characteristic is that they always carry with them a compulsory power of persuasion. To equate thought and understanding with these logical operations means to level the capacity for thought, which for thousands of years has been deemed to be the highest capacity of man, to its lowest common denominator, where no differences in actual existence count any longer, not even the qualitative differences between the essence of God and men.²⁴⁰

A number of Arendtian preoccupations find expression here, notably the importance of a public realm, where events occur and are registered as such, that is genuinely independent of individual caprice, but which at the same time is more than the mere accumulation of facts or the coercion of logicity, i.e. that which constitutes a meaningful shared experience, a world. This is the realm of freedom *and* a somehow damaged common sense 'controlling and adjusting' the particular. Its existence may be a necessary precondition for, but is not identical with the *sensus communis*, the critical

²⁴⁰ Arendt, Op Cit. p. 318.

faculty shared by the true judges. It is here that action can occur and where something genuinely new and unforeseen can happen.

The historian studies the genuinely new - events that have never happened before - but if he or she mechanically applies causality to events she will end up by claiming inevitability. But 'causality, however, is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences...the event illuminates its own past; it can never be deduced from it' ²⁴¹ After the event we can look back and see a story that had its beginnings in the past, and which now appears as an end. But when we act we treat the situation brought about by the event as a beginning (which is how it will appear to future historians). Stories have meaning and distinction in them; causality has neither. This is why Arendt makes what might seem to be the astonishing claim that 'whoever in the historical sciences honestly believes in causality actually denies the subject matter of his own science'. She is thinking of the historical determinism that would deny human freedom - the capacity to make a new beginning. 'History is a story which has many beginnings but no end'.

When new humans come into the world they bring beginnings with them: they are the beings whose essence is beginning. Even if we have experienced the ruin of our categories and standard of judgment,

a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality. If the essence of all, and in particular of political action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action, namely, that form of cognition, distinct from many others by which acting men (and not men who are engaged in contemplating some progressive or doomed course of history) eventually can come to terms with

²⁴¹ Ibid. p. 319.

what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists.²⁴²

Preliminary understanding is engaged in action. True understanding must execute the circle that allows us to 'articulate and confirm' what has already been sensed. This process of understanding, essentially circular, is the mind's 'interminable dialogue between itself and the essence of everything that is.' For this we need the faculty of imagination in order to confront the 'darkness of the human heart and the peculiar density which surrounds everything that is real.'

'Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective' it helps us to think without bias ('distancing') and see others concerns as if they were our own ('bridging'); it is therefore a key part of the unending dialogue of understanding. This is very similar to Kant's understanding of the proper exercise of common sense as *sensus communis*, and of the process of reflective judgment. Indeed, the Kantian flavour of the final section of 'Understanding and Politics' is extremely pronounced. Arendt concludes by identifying imagination with understanding as the way in which we orient ourselves in the world: 'it is the only inner compass we have. We are contemporaries only so far as our understanding reaches.'²⁴³

Action makes a new beginning while understanding helps us to come to terms with what happened. When Arendt begins to use a more explicitly Kantian language she does not cease to think in these temporal terms, but 'understanding' is superseded by the twin terms 'thinking' and 'judging'. The notion that it is the backward glance of the judge that

²⁴² Ibid. pp. 321-322.

²⁴³ Ibid.

confers meaning on the past continues the theme.²⁴⁴ There is a tension between thinking and acting, which reflects the tension of the private/public, and political/philosophical dichotomies in Arendt's thinking. Her understanding of judging is that it is the intermediary between the two zones: judgment is the face of thinking turned towards the space of appearances. But before we can consider this space as it appears in her thinking about labour, work and action we must turn to the work in which Arendt's understanding was deployed in grasping the meaning of historical events: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

²⁴⁴ See Mewes, 2009 *passim* for an account of the interrelations of action and judgment in politics, and the way in which meaning emerges in the public realm.

Chapter 3

The Burden of Our Time

The Origins of Totalitarianism, The Human Condition and On Revolution.

Dreyfus

On January 5th 1895 a traitor was marched onto the parade ground at the Ecole Militaire, Place Fontenoy.²⁴⁵ Assembled there were units of the Paris Garrison, the press, dignitaries and the general public (who were in the street outside, pressed against the gates and on roofs). It was a bitterly cold day, with snowflakes in the wind. At last the disgraced man was marched onto the grounds. This was Alfred Dreyfus and he had been found guilty of betraying army secrets to the German Charge d'affairs. He was now to undergo the long process of punishment beginning with this spectacle of his public humiliation.

General Darras, on horseback, was in the centre of the parade ground, with his staff officers behind him. Outside the gates, on Place Fontenoy there was by now a large crowd. 'Death to the Jew' "and 'death to Judas' could be heard. A roll of drums. Before the ranks of soldiers, the journalists and the crowd there came the figure of Dreyfus, escorted by a brigadier and four soldiers. Dreyfus walked 'resolutely', head high,

²⁴⁵ This account of Dreyfus' humiliation draws on Jean-Denis Bredin's very detailed work: *The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus*. See Bredin, 1986.

shoulders back ('Judas walks too well' one of the journalists - Maurice Barres - later commented). On reaching a point just in front of Darras his escort withdrew and he stood to attention before the general. The sun briefly shone through the clouds. The clerk of the court martial read out the sentence. Darras rose in his stirrups, raised his sword and intoned the following words: 'Alfred Dreyfus, you are longer worthy of bearing arms. In the name of the French people we dishonour you' Dreyfus cried out: 'Soldiers, an innocent man is being degraded; soldiers, an innocent man is being dishonoured. Long live France! Long live the army,' from the crowd could be heard more cries of 'death to the Jew! Death to Judas!'

Sergeant Major Bouxin of the *Garde Republicain* approached and ripped the decorations from Dreyfus' cap and sleeves, the stripes from his trousers and his epaulettes. He took the condemned man's sword and broke it over his knee. Standing now in rags Dreyfus let out a cry that turned into a sob: 'Long live France! I am innocent! I swear it on the heads of my wife and children!'. He was then made to march past the troops. As he passed the railing there were more cries of 'death!' etc., from the crowd. He returned: 'you have no right to insult me. I am innocent.' 'Coward, dirty Jew!' The journalists saw everything he did and how he looked and saw it all as confirmation of his guilt and debased nature. When he came before them he cried 'you must tell all of France I am innocent.' The answer to this was another torrent of abuse from the crowd. At the end of the courtyard two gendarmes heaved him up into a prison car for the trip to jail, which would be followed by transportation to 'Devil's Island'.

The Dreyfus affair really begins with this scene. For it was the battle to clear Dreyfus' name that exposed the divisions in France at the start of the Twentieth Century. Indeed, the *affaire* may actually have served to harden those divisions. Dreyfus was a Jewish officer who rose to become a member of the army's general staff. He was wrongly accused of selling secrets to the Germans and sentenced — after the event we have just

described — to deportation to ‘Devils Island’, the convict colony in the French West Indies. Doubts about the safety of the conviction were soon made public, and a campaign to clear his name began soon after the trial; it was successful in the end, but the battle divided much of French public opinion into ‘Dreyfusards’ and anti-Dreyfusards. The causes, consequences and meaning of the affair have been much discussed.

For Arendt it was ‘the only episode in which the subterranean forces of the nineteenth century enter the full light of recorded history,’ an event important in itself and for what it reveals about the decline of the nation state, the development of race thinking into ‘political anti-semitism’ and the racial ideologies of *ressentiment*.²⁴⁶ Even more, it acts as a kind of prelude and emblem of the way in which the life of the individual could be stripped of its dignity, its rights and its place in the world: the destruction of the legal-political ‘home’. And what began with the loss of political and legal status in the world would end, forty years later, with physical liquidation.

Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* is organised into three sections: ‘Anti-semitism’, ‘Imperialism’ and ‘Totalitarianism’, and her account of the Dreyfus affair comes at the close of the first section, taking up about thirty dense pages of analytical commentary. This may indicate the peculiar character of the book, as well as the importance she gave to the affair itself. To understand the importance of the Dreyfus affair to Arendt, as well as what she was trying to achieve in this book and why it is relevant to her developing notion of judgment, we need to take first a step back to the circumstances under which it was written.

²⁴⁶ Arendt, 1951 p. 120.

The Burden of Our Time

It seems that the first plan of the book that would become *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was already taking shape when Arendt and her husband were still in France. It would be a study of racism and imperialism. As she and Blucher struggled to support themselves, first with part time teaching and journalism, later with full time appointments at the New School and Bard College, they were also trying to make sense of the reports from Europe of what the Nazis were doing to the Jewish populations of Europe. Alongside that, Arendt was deeply involved in debates about a future homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine (Arendt supported the establishment of a homeland for the Jews, but was deeply opposed to the foundation of a *Jewish* State with Arabs as a minority people: in her view a state should include Jews and Arabs on an equal footing – it should not take the *volkisch* model of German nationalism. Her view was in a minority). It's in the light of these events that we need to consider the book that she worked on from about 1945.

What kind of book is *The Origins of Totalitarianism*?²⁴⁷ Almost everything about it seems anomalous, puzzling, and misleading. The title itself and the publication date may create false expectations, giving the impression that the book is a relic of cold war 'political science' polemic.²⁴⁸ A glance at the contents might lead to more puzzlement, for out of about 500 dense pages the section on totalitarianism takes up only 200 or so, with two other sections, entitled 'Anti-semitism' and 'Imperialism' filling up the rest. If the

²⁴⁷ See Bernard Crick in Hill, 1979 for an overview and attempt at assessment: pp. 27-44.

²⁴⁸ See also Margaret Canovan's insightful remarks on the peculiar structure of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the effect of this on its reception; she is also correct in seeing the book as vital for anyone wishing to understand Arendt's later work (Canovan, 1992 pp. 17-23). My overall interpretation of the import of the book differs from Canovan, however. Canovan describes *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as 'concerned with imperialism rather than Nazism as such' (p.19), which is right in so far as it reduces the importance of the final section of the book, but still misleading (I argue) as imperialism for Arendt is a symptom of a *deeper* malaise she detects in 'western' modernity.

book is ‘about’ totalitarianism it seems to be taking a long time to get there. Indeed, Arendt only decided upon the current title at the last minute, with earlier ideas including: *The Elements of Shame: Anti-Semitism-Imperialism-Racism*, then *The Three Pillars of Hell*, and *A History of Totalitarianism*. Perhaps the best title for this hard-to-categorise book was that of the original British edition: *The Burden of Our Time*.

Any significant, sophisticated cultural object is capable of multiple interpretations, and I want to suggest that what is significant about this book is discernible only in part from the author’s expressed intent (important though that is). To see *The Origins of Totalitarianism* plain we need to see it first as a kind of prolegomenon to her series of investigations into the questions of political/public space, judgment and natality. This gives it a retrospective importance. But it is more than just clearing the ground for the later work. It gains significance, too, when we see it as a *performance* of the kind of narration aimed at discovering meaning in the most recent events of her and our time. Arendt was insistent on the importance of objectivity as a matter distinct from impartiality, and on the way in which narrative, which is always the backward glance that tries to make sense of the past, must respect what actually happened without falling for the illusion that what occurred *had* to happen in the way it did — the fallacy of determinism.²⁴⁹ It is also notable — and her revisions and rethinkings indicate this clearly — that for Arendt, an enquiry meant a genuine readiness to suspend judgment, to change one’s mind and to allow the process of research and writing to teach the writer herself. Thus the book grows and changes as she works on it from the mid 1940s to 1951.

But what did she think she was doing at the time? And how did her work change? Perhaps, as Elizabeth Young-Bruehl indicates in her biography, Arendt’s intentions are better revealed in the memos she sent to Mary Underwood of Houghton Mifflin, than in

²⁴⁹ See Villa, 1999, p.181 on the issue of determinism.

anything she says in the prefaces to the book.²⁵⁰ They reveal that Arendt was thinking carefully about narrative and history, and since narrative is an important theme in her work, it is worth paying attention to what she says. Commenting that she wants to avoid the kind of history writing that is a 'supreme justification for what happened' or simple condemnation she goes on

A mere polemical approach has also been avoided. It is permitted only as long as the author can fall back upon a firm ground of traditional values which are accepted without questioning and on which judgments can be formed....I no longer believe that any tradition in itself can offer us such a basis. A polemical approach, in my case would have been simply cynical and certainly unconvincing.²⁵¹

This was written in 1946 and it indicates not only that Arendt was already of the view that the catastrophes of the 'Twentieth Century had had important destructive implications for any judgments that would seek to base themselves on traditions, inherited moral codes etc, but that she was thinking about the implications for writing. She wants, in effect, to discover rather than prove a thesis.²⁵² So the book is to be an investigation into the three pillars of hell – the problems of anti-semitism, imperialism and race to which the Nazis offered a ghastly 'solution'. She goes on to say that she aims to 'find out the main elements of Nazism, to trace them back and to discover the underlying real political problems... the aim of the book is not to give answers but to prepare the ground.'²⁵³

This is one of the reasons the book does not have a conventional structure – its subject was changing as events happened.²⁵⁴ Arendt's conception of the book as an investigation into anti-Semitism and racism was, unsurprisingly, profoundly changed by

²⁵⁰ Young-Bruehl, 1982 [2nd ed. 2004] pp. 200-203.

²⁵¹ Ibid. p. 201.

²⁵² Maria Pia Lara argues that Arendt was using reflective judgment in naming 'totalitarianism' and in identifying Eichmann as a 'negative exemplar' (see Lara 2007, introduction and chapter 4).

²⁵³ Ibid. p. 201.

²⁵⁴ I see Arendt as a thinker who develops trains of thought, constellations of ideas and provisional conclusions rather than as a philosopher with a worked out view of plurality, judgment, totalitarianism etc. In my view, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a good example of the process. For an alternative view to mine see *The Hidden Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, M. Betz Hull, 2002.

the revelations of what had been happening in Europe that came out after 1945. And in 1958 she added material on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, commenting that those events had taught her a lesson about the possible re-emergence of the council system of government. The work is thus open-ended; it was conceived as an investigation and as such it could be broken off but never definitely concluded, probing the ‘unsolved real problems’ behind the elements that presented themselves at mid century, and which have a clear relevance to the twenty-first century:

...behind anti-Semitism, the Jewish question; behind the decay of the national state, the unsolved problem of a new organisation of peoples; behind racism the unsolved problem of a new concept of mankind; behind expansion for expansion’s sake the unsolved problem of organising a constantly shrinking world which we are bound to share with peoples whose histories and traditions are outside the western world²⁵⁵

Imperialism in its ultimate racist form thought it had the answers and could master these ‘tasks of our times’.

As for Arendt’s methodology, the book lacks any clear statement, as Elizabeth Young-Bruehl notes. But Arendt did give a lecture in 1954 to the New School for Social Research which goes some way to revealing her thinking about what she was doing when she wrote about recent history:

The elements of totalitarianism form its origins, if by origins we do not mean ‘causes’. Causality, i.e., the factor of determination of a process of events in which always one event causes and can be explained by another is probably an alien and falsifying category in the realm of the historical and political sciences. Elements by themselves probably never cause anything. They become origins of events if and when they crystallise into fixed and definite forms. Then, and only then, can we trace their history backwards. The event illuminates its own past, but can never be deduced from it.²⁵⁶

We might almost think of this as Arendt’s version of *nachträglichkeit*, a kind of hermeneutic that implies retroactive effect, i.e., the labour of narrativising the past, of

²⁵⁵Young-Bruehl, p. 202

²⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 203.

coming to see the meaning of events by looking back into their past, trumps the simple causality of determinism, and may change the meaning of the present from which the backward glance is cast.²⁵⁷ For Arendt, it is the role of the historian, as a kind of maker, to labour in order that the deeds of the past should not be forgotten; and this meant for her, a struggle to replace the bare facts of what happened with a narrative of meaning that would help the people of the present find a home in the world. Without wishing to foist a fully worked-out theory of retroactive effect on Arendt, it does seem as if here and elsewhere she is working with some such idea. This is not surprising, given her rejection of history-writing that merely seeks to uncover the ‘iron laws’ of history and that tends to identify the real as the rational. It is, however, another aspect of her fresh and (for the 1950s) innovative thinking about politics and history. Moreover, she can be seen here to be enacting the ‘backward glance’ that judgment, as she would come to argue, always involves.²⁵⁸

Arendt’s writing of the book had a provisional quality to it right up to publication. The third part (‘totalitarianism’) began to depart from her first ideas about ‘race imperialism’ because she was deepening her sense of what ‘totalitarianism’ might be. This was in large part, surely, because of the great increase of information about what had been happening in Europe between 1942-1945 and political developments since the end of the war. Parts 1 and 2 were largely completed by 1946, with the third part being mainly written in 1948-9. The discovery of the camps, in particular, encouraged her to rethink what Nazi and Stalinist terror had meant, in particular what evil might be, a train of thinking she was never to relinquish, although she did modify it as she went forwards:

²⁵⁷ In the light of these and similar remarks by Arendt, it is surprising that Bhikhu Parekh could have made the claim that she is in some sense a determinist. See Parekh, 1981, p.184.

²⁵⁸ Benhabib is right to reject the idea that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* depicts totalitarianism as somehow the inevitable result of modernity and enlightenment, but her account then presents it as entirely contingent. The debate about this touches on the most profound questions of historical inevitability and contingency. One might not have to choose between the two poles – hence the attractiveness of Arendt’s method. See Benhabib, 1996, xxxii.

The concentration camps are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested...In their efforts to prove that everything is possible, totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes that men can neither punish nor forgive. When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, thirst for power, and cowardice and therefore which anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive.²⁵⁹

It was the apparent equation of the Nazi concentration camps with the Soviet gulags that so incensed some on the left. Yet at the time and since, people have often failed to note the distinction she makes between Soviet foreign policy, which she thought did not licence unilateral US intervention, and what went on internally — the gulags. She did not specify what ought to be done, although Young-Bruehl thinks it was clear that it should involve action by a comity of nations.

We need to employ historical tact to appreciate her position in the 1950s. For Arendt it was the fixation with factions within Russia that blurred the sight of anti-Stalinist intellectuals when it came to looking steadily at what had to be confronted at mid-century, the phenomenon of the totalitarian party-state and the use of terror as a permanent feature of these regimes. Soviet foreign policy might use all the old evil methods of aggression, but the larger question was how to respond to the new phenomenon that the Nazi and Soviet regimes represented. In all this it becomes too easy to lose sight of the main thrust of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the importance of each of the three parts of the work.

The Origins of Totalitarianism enacts a working-back from the 1940s to the nineteenth

²⁵⁹ Young-Bruehl, 2004, p. 205.

‘bourgeois century,’ in an attempt to understand what we have been doing. Arendt’s revisions, additions and deletions speak to her good faith here. If we insist on seeing the book as an exercise in cold war liberal thinking about the USSR then we miss the central assault she makes on liberalism itself, as the philosophy that had incubated the beast. The fullest meaning of the book lies in its place as a kind of experiment in thinking through and clarifying certain key understandings (of evil, of the engulfing bourgeois fixation with private gain) in order to make true judgment possible and as a kind of prolegomenon to her later studies of the human condition and revolution. It is an exercise in establishing the meaning of what has happened, of making it possible to come to a judgment that does not rely on cliché or inherited modes of thought. The totalitarian regime of Stalin himself, which as she acknowledged, had begun to ‘detotalitarianise’ under Khrushchev, is not the central subject of the book. The true subject is the development of powerful forces in modern society that pulverise public political life. And these forces are still active in the twenty-first century: this is the emerging lesson of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.²⁶⁰

The Origins of Totalitarianism is a long book, and there are a bewilderingly large number of trails one could follow. But the overarching theme is visible: it is the patient reconstruction, in the service of understanding, of the factors that lay behind the ‘great questions’ of modernity that Nazism had seemed to answer. So the book is a kind of backward glance, with the aim of comprehension (however finally unachievable this is). It is infused with a kind of moral tone, for as we’ve noted, *Objectivity* is the aim, not impartiality – Arendt is judging and not merely describing. If we examine the three

²⁶⁰ Canovan is right to emphasise the way in which *The Origins of Totalitarianism* reveals a ‘collapse of western civilisation with its implied standards and beliefs’ (Canovan, 1992 p.61). She goes on to link the predicament with the concerns of existentialism – an open future and a kind of abyss of nihilism. Again, the lesson to draw is that the themes of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* are about the catastrophe of a certain modernity, in which racism, imperialism and ‘totalitarianism’ feature as hugely significant stages, but are not in themselves the sole subject of Arendt’s concerns.

sections with this in mind her book's main purpose becomes clearer.²⁶¹

Anti-Semitism

A study of modern anti-Semitism opens the book. Arendt links the phenomenon to the rise and fall of the nation state: it is thus vital to understand it because of its intrinsic significance, but also because it opens up the pathological condition of the modern 'bourgeois' state as incubator of the toxins that would poison Europe in the twentieth century. Following anti-semitism, we trace the rise and fall of the nation state, the rise of and metamorphoses of the bourgeois class and the failure of the rhetoric of human rights when there is no power or will to enforce them.

This part of the book has three chapters: the first challenging received ideas about anti-Semitism, and proposing an alternative view; the second a selective history of the changing status of the Jews in Europe, with portraits of some significant examples; and finally a detailed examination of the Dreyfus case. These chapters have an intrinsic interest as well as being notable for the early appearance of some key Arendtian themes: the relationship between truth, facts and opinion, action and responsibility, the loss of common sense and traditional ways of understanding. All these will come together to play a significant part in her later account of judgment. Throughout, Arendt threads a way that keeps a sense of the reality of things, without lapsing into a mere positivism; her aim is meaningful comprehension, and this must involve respect for what really happened (objectivity) while being prepared to take sides.

Arendt begins by rejecting the popular 'eternal scapegoat' idea of anti-semitism, which she dismisses as a mystification. To grasp what happened one must track the fate

²⁶¹ In my view Seyla Benhabib is right to defend the continuing value of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* against Canovan's doubts about its 'questionable' interpretation of totalitarianism. The book, as she says, has a new relevance for the 'post totalitarian' moment of 1989 and after as it raises questions about the loss and recovery of political space in modernity. See Benhabib, 1996, p xxxi.

of the Jews in Europe after the French Revolution, as the phenomenon of anti-semitism in modernity is essentially a post Christian one: it must not be conflated with medieval Jew-hatred for the ‘killers of Christ,’ etc. In any case that view — that Jews are somehow fated to be victims — is an evasion: it denies responsibility to the persecutors *and* victims. It is ‘just their fate’. This sort of approach is a substitute for thinking, not an answer. Modern anti-Semitism arises in particular circumstances and takes on the forms it does for reasons Arendt intended to investigate. Accounts that rely on old ‘common sense’ explanations are not adequate when it comes to something authentically new.

Arendt’s thesis is that we have to follow the actual story of what happened to the Jews in relation to the changes in the post-revolutionary states of Europe in order to understand what happened and why, and in doing this we begin to approach an understanding of the events of the Twentieth Century. The second chapter gives an account of the way in which some Jews went from ‘court Jews’ (individually wealthy individuals relied on by Princes for loans), to bankers to the post-1792 states of Europe (Bleichroder in Prussia, the Rothschilds in Britain and France etc), to finally being displaced by non-Jewish business interests in the age of imperialism (after about 1885). During this period, the bourgeois class went from being a relatively powerless, passive class, content to let a state that stood above sectional interests conduct the business of state, to being the dominant class in society. What is significant about this last phase is the way in which competing business interests became all powerful *before* the rise of modern anti-semitism. Their ideology represented the state as no more than a machine for self-enrichment; and hungry for power and profit, they were committed to the exploitation of non-European peoples, to imperialism.

With chapter three we arrive at ‘The Dreyfus Affair.’ What stands out here in Arendt’s account of the “comedy” of the retrials, through to Dreyfus’ vindication (which,

she points out, was never wholehearted on the part of the establishment) is her vision of the decrepitude of the French State. For Arendt it had become something by 1900 quite other than the Republic of 'equality, liberty and solidarity', of the revolution. She describes it as little more than a mechanism for the pursuit of self-interest by individuals and groups, and if Clemenceau²⁶² is the hero here, he appears as a kind of Don Quixote, still taking the Republic's founding commitment to the Rights of Man as something *actual*, when in fact the state of things was by now very different. By the end of the nineteenth century the state becomes like the carcass of a dead creature, swarming with parasites that consume it from the inside.

Yet France is only an advanced case. Austria and Weimar Germany would take the same route and be in the same state of decay in the following decades, and in them, as in France, a powerless but visible minority would become the targets of the new politics of mass manipulation and 'race thinking'. It is as if the rise to political power of the bourgeois class becomes the precondition of the further stages of decomposition: as the bourgeois order begins to degrade the public institutions which alone make a collective life of citizens possible, so they are overtaken by the new 'politics' which in turn accelerates the decline of bourgeois standards of morality. Arendt stresses the way that what she calls 'the mob', the excluded residue of every class of society, increases its power at this time. Once on the periphery, and available for the demagogue or the rabble-raising bourgeois politician, the fickle and violent mob becomes more than a tool to be picked up or put down by the opportunist politician or racist journalist. It becomes central to the new 'politics of the street', a precursor of the coming 'massification' and totalitarianism. Arendt's point is that a genuine political life depended on the possibility of a public sphere and that this could only be ensured if the state maintained the

²⁶² Tuija Parvikko reads the figures of Socrates, Eichmann and Lazare (one of the earliest defenders of Dreyfus) in Arendt's texts as Weberian ideal types. We might add Clemenceau to that list. See Parvikko in Hermsen and Villa, p 127.

structures of public life, those institutions, codes and practices that ensure the continuity of a non-arbitrary law, of the 'Rights of Man'. With such structures the individual could take on the aspect of citizen; without them, there was no space in which he or she could be other than a lonely individual in a mass of other lonely individuals.²⁶³

Arendt's account of the way in which the Jews became singled out by the new 'race thinking' and mob politics may well be incomplete. One might argue, for instance, that the account of the Fascist/Nazi identification of the Jews as the 'race enemy' needs supplementing with a consideration of the ways in which internal antagonisms (class divisions) were displaced onto a convenient other who could be 'held responsible' for the immiseration of workers and the proletarianisation of the petit bourgeoisie, for military defeat, inflation and unemployment. But as we've seen, Arendt is not trying to give the kind of historical account that would explain the advent of 'political anti-semitism' in the Twentieth Century in terms of causes that *had* to have just these effects. Barres and Drumont in 1898 do not entail Laval and Petain in 1940, any more than Luegar or Houston Chamberlain give us Goebbels or Hitler. She is trying to orient thought by a kind of analytical narrative, illuminating the way the enlightenment, 'Liberal' ideals of the nineteenth century metamorphosed into the mass terror of totalitarianism in the twentieth. A fuller account of the preconditions of twentieth century anti-semitism is no doubt possible; but such an account would still fall short of a 'total explanation', in which effects are revealed in their causes. No such account exists, or could exist.

Imperialism

Arendt opens this section with a chapter entitled 'the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie', and it amounts to a retelling of the same story but from a new perspective,

²⁶³ We can also see here the early appearance in Arendt of one (demonic) version of the 'other': the ungovernable rabble or mob, the *ochlos* to the republic's *demos*. As we have already seen, this 'other' shadows Kant's and Arendt's accounts of taste and *sensus communis*. Perhaps this rejected excess is the spectre that haunts political philosophy. See Ranciere, 2010 p. 66, as well as the final chapter of the present work.

that of the pressure for ‘endless expansion’. This pressure arises initially as the principle of business speculation, but ultimately takes on a logic of its own that far outstrips capitalist rationality. This is the logic, not of empire building (as with the Romans) but of *imperialism*: the unending pursuit of land, markets and subject peoples for the sake of expansion itself. One of the effects of this essentially nihilistic drive is to make rule by ‘administrative decree’ ‘normal’, another is the normalisation of violence and terror as a way of getting results.

The section on imperialism both carries Arendt’s account forward and retraces some of the ground already covered, that of the development of the modern state. The effect is stereoscopic. The core period under discussion is 1884-1914 — the phase of imperialist expansion by the European powers. And Arendt’s discussion takes in, *inter alia*: the aforementioned rise to power by the bourgeois class, with its links to the mob; the phenomenon of hyper-expansionism; the growth of bureaucratic/administrative methods of control; the ‘pan’ movements of central and Eastern Europe, with their ‘race thinking’; and the vicissitudes of the ‘Rights of Man’ under the impact of these dynamic phenomena. This section is, for our purposes, the most important in the book, as it is here we see most clearly Arendt’s developing awareness of the distinction between two principles. The first is that of the human creature, as situated or framed by law and right, and made visible as citizen to other citizens. In this context, the merely human becomes the political animal, recognising and being recognised by others, and bounded in a finite space by laws that are knowable by all, and which are known to be human creations. This is the essentially political dimension of modern life, characterised by a sense of responsibility to a visible, shared world that one is born into and then leaves for those who come after; it is essentially ‘extraverted’ in the sense that the emphasis is on the other and the space between people. It is the indispensable *topos* for the exercise of *judgment*. Against this, is the principle of contempt for the laws of man, and the worship

of another kind of law: the pseudo natural laws of power, expansion, success, the 'logic of history', the 'survival of the fittest', etc. This is the dimension of bureaucratic-administrative rule by decree, and it is characterised by secrecy and a kind of introversion or rejection of the world and the degradation of humanity to the level of what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life'.²⁶⁴

Bourgeois Power Politics in the Age of Imperialism.

The section open with a chapter devoted to the rise to political power of the bourgeoisie. Arendt notes that a certain set of attitudes became increasingly prevalent. These attitudes comprise hostility to the state, to politics, and to the *res publica*. For Arendt, imperialism was the phenomenon that dragged state power — the monopoly of 'legitimate' violence — after the pursuit of profit. This search for profit soon develops its own momentum, far outstripping its initial search for markets and exploitable peoples, to develop a nihilistic power-for-power's-sake drive that prefigures the Nazi phenomenon. The bourgeois' private pursuit of wealth and success, limited by the mortality of mere men, is foisted onto the public political life of the state, recognising only one law, that of limitless, permanent expansion:

Private interests... escape into the sphere of public affairs and borrow from them that infinite length of time that is needed for continuous accumulation.

The behaviour of individuals becomes presented

²⁶⁴ We return to Agamben in the final chapter of the present work.

as laws of history, or economics, politics. Liberal concepts, however, while they express the bourgeoisie's instinctive distrust of and its innate hostility to, public affairs, are only a temporary compromise between the old standards of Western culture and the new class's faith in property as a dynamic, self moving principle. The old standards give way to the extent that *automatically growing wealth actually replaces political action*.²⁶⁵

Imperialism comes to prolong the life of an essentially precarious, rotting structure. According to Arendt, Imperial expansion results from a drive to export capital, before developing into something else. A class of individuals whose relation to the common good is already that of the parasite suborns the state. It is to protect their foreign investments and speculations that the state comes to be of interest to the bourgeois; an instrumental relation to state power which continues 'the established tradition of bourgeois society, always to consider political institutions exclusively as an instrument for the protection of individual property.'²⁶⁶ But imperialism soon begins to serve another function: as a conduit for the export of "superfluous men", the idle, parasitic fortune hunting types — a type we have met with before in 'the mob'.

Aspects of Arendt's account here have a distinctly Marxist flavour. However, her contention that economic considerations were superseded by power, race and the urge to expand for expansion's sake go well beyond a traditional account of that kind: 'while socialists were still probing the economic "laws" of capitalism, the imperialists had stopped obeying them.'²⁶⁷ (Perhaps Nietzsche or Foucault are the names one should invoke here.) Arendt is willing to present economic factors as central in the imperial expansion of 1885-1914, but in her view they do not determine the outcome in a law-like way. Arendt's awareness of contingency, the 'could have been otherwise,' separates her

²⁶⁵ Arendt, 1951 pp. 145-146. My emphasis.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 149.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 149.

analysis from vulgar Marxism (Arendt may have more in common with such latter-day Marxist analysts as Frederic Jameson, for whom ‘infrastructure’ and economic forces represent problems for interpretation rather than self-explanatory principles. There are also parallels in her thought with the work of Adorno and Horkheimer in this respect, as well as in their shared concern that people have been turned into means or instruments rather than being treated as genuinely free beings).²⁶⁸

Everywhere we find Arendt stressing the way in which imperialism, the push for overseas expansion, ‘gave nationalism a new lease of life.’²⁶⁹ (In principle, nationalism and imperialism were quite distinct things; in practice, they were ‘bridged by tribal nationalism and outright racism’). Arendt’s account is that of decrepit states, ‘fragile institutions’ and outdated systems getting a new brief lease of life from the imperialist movement. But the sense that Arendt conveys to this process is that of an addict who has found a new stimulant. It is a temporary expedient, able to prolong but not preserve the life of the individual: ‘the means for preservation were desperate too, and in the end the remedy proved worse than the evil – which incidentally, it did not cure.’²⁷⁰

Arendt ends Chapter Five with a reflection on the phenomenon of the mob allied to capital. For her, this by-product of bourgeois society, this ‘Hobbesian refuse,’ had come to substitute itself for society and had come to take on the final form of a bourgeoisie unencumbered by tradition, Christianity or even hypocrisy.²⁷¹ Its ‘race-thinking’ was a denial of common humanity, its drive for unlimited power had no obvious terminus except destruction: a ‘possible end to the west’. In some of her most

²⁶⁸ Hansen makes this point: see Hansen, 1993, p. 58. Also Adorno and Horkheimer, 1993, *passim*.

²⁶⁹ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 154.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 154–5.

²⁷¹ See Hansen, 1993 on Arendt’s view of Hobbes as the special philosopher of the bourgeoisie (p 152). Canovan comments on Arendt’s ‘extreme hostility’ to the bourgeoisie in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and notes her use of terms like ‘mob’ and ‘masses’ rather than ‘workers’ or ‘people’ – for Canovan this indicates her ‘rather romantic sympathy’ with the labour movement and may indicate a desire to distinguish it from the supporters of racism and imperialism. Canovan sees the hostility but misses the main point, in my view: the hostility to the bourgeoisie arises from Arendt’s diagnosis of the real problem. See Canovan, p 65.

brilliant pages she reviews the consequences of a mob that has learned the lesson that violence works in maintaining the momentum of power accumulation:

If it should prove true that we are imprisoned in Hobbes's endless process of power accumulation, then the organisation of the mob will inevitably take the form of transformation of nations into races, for there isno other unifying bond available between individuals who in the very process of power accumulation and expansion are losing all natural connections with their fellow men.²⁷²

The nature of those 'connections with their fellow men' is to be a large part of Arendt's investigations in the years after the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Indeed, it is a concern with the way in which political life honours the essential plurality of human life that links her study of Eichmann to the growing importance of judgment in her work. The obverse of this interest in what serves plurality and judgment is an attempt to understand the forces that menace them.²⁷³ For now, it is racism, as a noxious product of imperialism and power accumulation, that concerns her, but her vision always keeps the centrality of politics in view:

Racism may indeed carry out the doom of the Western world and, for that matter, the whole of human civilisation. When Russians have become Slavs, when Frenchmen have assumed the role of commanders of a *force noire*, when Englishmen have turned into "white men", as already for a disastrous spell all Germans became Aryans, then this change will itself signify the end of Western man. For no matter what learned scientists may say, race is, politically speaking, not the beginning of humanity but its end, not the origin of peoples but their decay, not the natural birth of man but his unnatural death.²⁷⁴

Arendt points out that 'race thinking', though a useful tool, did not cause racism,

²⁷² Arendt, 1951 p. 157.

²⁷³ As Hansen says, 'for Arendt it is not modernity as such, but its bourgeois dimensions, that is largely the culprit in the rise of totalitarianism'. Hansen, 1993 p. 153. While I am less clear than he is that one can separate modernity from its bourgeois dimensions, I do endorse the overall thrust of his remark. It is the growth of the bourgeois spirit that that dissolves the public, republican space of political action.

²⁷⁴ Arendt, 1951 p 157.

but stemmed from the *experience* of imperialism. Race-thinking received the support of the science of the day, which ‘found’ its essentially ideological results, providing a useful cover of intellectual respectability for something that was being driven by the expansionism of the age. But the racism that the decaying nation states began to incubate would be the destroyer of those same states. Racists are poor patriots, and they were not going to further Clemenceau’s vision of a Jacobin republic, since they deny equality and common humanity within the state, even before oppressing other peoples outside it (Dreyfus may stand as the emblem for this). Racism is one of the ways in which the legacy of the enlightenment gets betrayed, and this happens because judgment and action gets referred, not to the human originators of those judgments and actions, but to something ‘behind’ or above them. In the end, racism is a recourse to a certain view of nature, expressed in the 1890s and 1900s for instance, in the terms of Herbert Spencer’s misunderstanding of Natural Selection as ‘survival of the fittest’, but in any case to something which drives and determines human affairs from behind the scenes. Arendt’s review of the way in which this thinking displaces the goal of republican rights can be seen as an early attempt to engage with this kind of ‘behind the scenes’ mystification. It helps to explain her later emphasis on judgment as central to political life.

Race and Bureaucracy

Arendt next turns to the way in which bureaucracy came to replace law and public discourse with decree and secrecy. These passages have an importance in her work as they mark an ongoing engagement with a phenomenon that it is still with us, and that she was to return to in her later work. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* we see bureaucracy in its historical context as an adjunct to imperialism; later we will see it incarnated in the figure of Eichmann and his like.

Bureaucracy is government by experts or specialists, an experienced elite or minority. As such it is anti-political in all its aspects, as it replaces stable and binding laws with rule by decrees that emanate from an occluded source. The bureaucrat wants to identify with unseen forces that 'pull the strings' and in this he follows the logic of the racist, since he too is relying on 'natural forces' rather than human affairs. These natural forces are really the "laws" of expansion and success, both for the bureaucrat himself with his career and his little 'empire' (Eichmann, for instance), and the power structure as a whole. Weber might have pictured bureaucracy as essentially rational, but since the goal of power here is power, the process must be regarded as nihilistic and irrational. The bureaucrat, in Arendt's account, is a function, not a citizen. He is in bad faith because he denies the human origins of action and judgment, specifically his own; and he is lawless because he is in thrall to the extremism of expansion, backed by "iron laws" and sanctified by success. Bureaucracy ensures that nothing is visible: others may not discuss possible courses of action, or different possible futures as everything has already been fixed; a perversion of law and stability that nevertheless demands law like obedience. It is as if a kind of 'determinate judgment' had taken exclusive hold over the bureaucrat, not in the form of tradition or law, but as decree from above, the faceless other, a Fuhrer's word, occulted 'law of history' or racial destiny. This is fatal to openness and plurality, since *deliberation* itself is denied, and where this occurs politics is impossible. Since politics *is* the practice of deliberation about possible futures, and the accountable judgments about what should come about, it is also the nemesis of natality: in the restless production of decrees and initiatives nothing genuinely new can come to be.

Rights and States

Arendt's final chapter in this section is of particular interest. 'The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man', not only continues Arendt's review

of the manner in which the nations of Europe abandoned the enlightenment promise of the 'revolutionary age' for the ideologies of race, but also seems to imply an intimate and necessary connection between the fate of the nation state and the concept of rights of man. As Agamben points out, she does not go very far in exploring this connection, but it is a provocative idea, and one that deserves some thought. What Arendt seems to be suggesting is that the two ideas operate in tandem and experience a terminal crisis together. But in her preferred style of analytical historical narrative, Arendt chooses to *show* us what happened rather than pursue philosophical reflection on the manner in which one concept might necessarily imply the other.²⁷⁵ But there is every reason why her readers might profitably engage in such reflection (as Agamben has done in *Homo Sacer*).²⁷⁶

The chapter opens with a review of the catastrophe itself: the wars, economic collapse, and persecution that, since 1914, have caused the mass migrations of peoples who

were welcomed nowhere and could be assimilated nowhere. Once they had left their homeland they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless; once they were deprived of their human rights they were rightless, the scum of the earth. Nothing that was being done, no matter how stupid, no matter how many people knew and foretold the consequences, could be undone or prevented. Every event had the finality of a last judgment, a judgment that was passed neither by God nor by the devil, but looked rather like the expression of some unredeemably stupid fatality.²⁷⁷

Arendt is clear that the phenomenon of statelessness was an effect of the

²⁷⁵ For a critical account of Agamben's work on the legacy of Auschwitz as 'state of exception' see Lara, 2007 chapter 6. She claims he is applying determinate judgment.

²⁷⁶ Agamben, 1978 *passim*.

²⁷⁷ Arendt, 1951 p. 267.

transformation of the state into a tool of the nation, here usually understood as a racially homogenous ethnic community. Statelessness is the ‘most symptomatic phenomenon’ of the modern epoch, and in this new situation it is the police that come to wield a power of life and death, expressed through the internment camp, the issuing or withholding of documents, the decision whether to deport, allow emigration etc. All this, for Arendt, foreshadowed the full rise to power of the totalitarian states. We might note that it has hardly become a thing of the past. What Arendt is here outlining is the experience of being ‘dehoused’ from the shelter of law, of legal status and of the predicament of humans reduced to existing not as recognised citizens but, to borrow Agamben’s phrase, as ‘bare life’. This is something that begins with the way the state (mis)treats the stateless, but soon becomes extended to all citizens:

For the nation-state cannot exist once its principle of equality before the law has broken down. Without this[...] the nation dissolves into an anarchic mass of over- and underprivileged individuals. Laws that are not equal for all revert to rights and privileges, something contradictory to the very nature of nation states. The clearer the proof of their inability to treat stateless people as legal persons and the greater the extension of arbitrary rule by police decree, the more difficult it is for states to resist the temptation to deprive all citizens of legal status and rule them with an omnipotent police.²⁷⁸

Arendt connects the failure of the nation state to treat all its citizens equally to the decline of the enlightenment concept of the ‘rights of man’, the emancipated citizen.²⁷⁹ Of course the ambiguity was there in the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen’, as Agamben notes. Was one included in the other? This takes us back to Dreyfus. Dreyfus was a man, but could he be regarded as a *citizen*? Those who should have protected him with their laws largely abandoned him grounds of race. He was the *wrong*

²⁷⁸ Ibid. p 290.

²⁷⁹ See Agamben, 1978 pp. 126-134 *passim* on this theme.

kind of man, a Jew, and therefore had his rights as a citizen disregarded.²⁸⁰ But what happened to Dreyfus in 1894 differs from the fate of French Jews in 1944 in only one key respect: in 1894 one had to be wrongfully accused of being a traitor, while by 1944 it was enough only to be a Jew to suffer abandonment by the laws of 'The Nation'.

For Arendt, the Rights of Man are linked to the Kantian idea of the 'freedom from tutelage.' Man makes the law, not God.²⁸¹ Individuals living after the decline of the old feudal 'estates' would have a guarantee, a bulwark against arbitrary power. These rights would be embedded in the people's right to self-government: in nations and peoples and not merely individuals, since only an emancipated people could effectively guarantee such rights. The declaration of 'the rights of man and citizen', thus seemed to hint at a tacit limitation: 'he has these rights *provided that he is a recognised citizen of the state*'. The problem, of course, would be what to do with those individuals who were not granted such recognition.

Arendt remarks that for the stateless, 'innocence was their misfortune'. Even criminals have a legal status, but for those who belonged to no state at all this meant the 'deprivation of a place in the world'. To be deprived of this is to become subject to a 'stupid fatality' indeed, because with the loss of a place in the world comes the erasure of their lives as humanly meaningful and significant. Those deprived of human rights are deprived

Not of the right to freedom, but of the right to action; not of the right to think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion. Privileges in some cases, injustices in most, blessings and doom are meted out to them according to accident and without any relation to what they do, did or may do.²⁸²

Arendt is very clear about the importance of place, of *topos*, for the preservation of

²⁸⁰ Note the reappearance of the image of the 'superfluous' or 'excess' human as outside, or illegitimately within, the body politic.

²⁸¹ C.f. Kant, 1991 ('What is Enlightenment?' *passim*).

²⁸² Arendt, 1951 p 296.

human plurality. Loss of such place (i.e. the legal-political status that goes with being the citizen of some specific polity) renders thought and action nugatory, as the human creature needs the recognition of *others* in order that what it is and does should have meaning. It is this recognition that lies at the heart of any possible *sensus communis*, of the exercise of judgment with others. To be expelled from a state is bad enough, but Arendt foreshadows here something even worse: as we come to truly live in One World, a loss of a polity will amount to a final loss of humanity. With the advent of a single human community there can be nowhere else to go: not merely deprived of rights, but utterly rightless, the expelled person is effectively expelled from humanity, a superfluous and excessive creature with nothing but an ‘abstract nakedness’.

Arendt is arguing that with the advent of what we are loosely calling ‘the Age of Revolutions’, the laws of the state replaced the divinely sanctioned laws, with rights providing a kind of bulwark against arbitrary mistreatment. That period thought that rights sprang, independent of human plurality, from a basis in the “nature” of man. (This may in part account for the problematic ambiguity about whether rights apply to the citizen or the man as such) Modernity however, finds itself as alienated from nature as the eighteenth Century was from history. Neither history nor nature is available to us as a basis from which to ‘deduct’ man’s essence. Arendt comments that, on the other hand, ‘Humanity’, which was a regulative idea for the eighteenth century, has become an ‘inescapable fact for us.’²⁸³ So it might seem that it is ‘Humanity’ that ought to guarantee the rights of every individual. Unfortunately, there is every reason to suspect that this is an impossibility.

We are living in an epoch that has abandoned both divine and ‘natural law’ conceptions of right as absolute safeguard for the life and dignity of the individual. When

²⁸³ Arendt, 1951 p. 298.

this protection is withdrawn, the individual is left particularly exposed, as with the growth of secularity comes an essentially *consequentialist* outlook. This outlook asks of everything, including rights, ‘what is it good for?’. Arendt speculates that a world government that did not recognise a divine or a natural bulwark for the individual would find extermination an entirely possible option for the dehousing, rightless, unplaced others. There is no reason to suppose that a world Government would correspond to the hopes of well meaning idealists: it could well be more like the Reich: Hitler’s motto was ‘right is what is good for the German people’. A democracy might decide that what was good for *it* was the liquidation of a part of humanity.²⁸⁴

As Arendt continues with her account of the way in which the revolutionary or enlightenment promise of equal rights for all was degraded and then all but lost in the twentieth century, we begin to see something else emerge. This is the outline of what will become Arendt’s ‘problematic’: the idea that, given the catastrophe of 1914-1945 we may actually have reached a place in which it is possible for the first time to think clearly about the significance of the political as the site of human freedom and possibility.²⁸⁵ This arises partly from a reflection on what it is to *lose* one’s place in a given political-legal community. When we lose the political dimension, we are thrown back on the mere ‘givenness’ of nature: the human as he is, particular, unchanging and unequal. This is rather like Hobbes’ ‘State of Nature’. The irony is that such a condition is no longer to be conceived of as a pre-political state of primitive man, but rather, as Agamben points out, the “state of exception” that occurs *within* a given political order, where the protection of the law is withdrawn from certain individuals, or categories of person (this should remind us of Arendt’s point above that states which deprive the stateless of equality under law

²⁸⁴ Arendt, 1951 p. 299.

²⁸⁵ See Dietz: ‘Arendt and the Holocaust’ in Villa 2000, P 102 for the view that Arendt effectively went on to subvert the evil of the Holocaust with her vision of a plural space of appearances.

soon cease to apply those same rights to all their citizens).²⁸⁶ Again, one thinks of Alfred Dreyfus as a prototype of the individual deprived of his rights by the state to which he belongs.

And so the significance of the public realm becomes clearer. Arendt has a sense that, in telling the story of how we came to be where we are now, we can begin to see what is of decisive importance for the future. She does this, not by deriving conclusions from ahistorical principles, but by registering what has happened and what continues to happen. Knowing her later work, we can see that she has already begun in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to delineate the issues that will be central to all of her later work: only in the public dimension of politics is equality and genuine change possible. In the public realm, action and speech become significant and individuals can confront each other as citizens; equality – *isonomia* – here is seen as a kind of achievement:

Equality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given us, but is the result of human organisation insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice. We are not born equal; we become equal as member of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights.²⁸⁷

To be forced out of such a political community is to lose ‘the result of our common labour, the outcome of the human artifice’.²⁸⁸

A little later, she comments on private life as ‘mere existence’. For Arendt, then, mere existence is a kind of threat to the human artifice that is the public sphere. It is the

²⁸⁶ Agamben, *Ibid. Passim*. But see Benhabib in Berkowitz et. al., 2010, pp. 60-61 who rejects what she sees as Agamben’s yoking of Arendt and Carl Schmitt together (she doesn’t follow up on the Foucault link, but seems to disapprove of it too). Her view, which seems to be based on a misreading of what Agamben is saying about ‘states of exception’ insists on the violence of Schmittian ‘exception’, and contrasts it with Arendt. But Agamben is not claiming that Arendt has a Schmittian view of the ‘redemptive value in violence’.

²⁸⁷ Arendt, 1951 p. 301.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 300.

‘dark background of mere givenness’²⁸⁹. While the *topos* of the political enables us to act in order to bring about change in the world, mere givenness reminds us of the limit to what we can do. For Arendt, the urge to ethnic homogeneity (and the concomitant fear of the alien) in modern states arises from an attempt to exclude this obvious aspect of ‘mere givenness’ and difference. The human animal, excluded from the political *topos* is deprived of specificity (of profession, of citizenship) and is flung back on mere individual difference which is deprived of significance, because unable to act in a common world with others.²⁹⁰

Totalitarianism

One of the things that Arendt is known for, of course, is the term *totalitarianism*. It is a word she did much to popularise and it is meant to describe the new kind of system found in the Nazi and Stalinist regimes.²⁹¹ For our purposes, however, it is less the validity of the description that will concern us, than the way in which it contributes to her developing sense of the importance of the public space, of the ‘political’ as such, and of course the role of judgment. Not that the language of judgment features directly in much of what she has to say here; nevertheless the story she has to tell is one that we can see makes the ‘clearing’ for her later discussion. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* poses a problem through the description of a catastrophe, the implications of which she will pursue in what comes next. Indeed, as we have been arguing, this has been the effect of much of the work as a whole. Anti-semitism, imperialism, pan-slavism and totalitarianism receive full treatment in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but what Arendt will come to see as the core problem – the abdication of thinking and judging and, more positively, the opportunities for ‘natality’ and the place of plurality in human affairs, can only receive their due once

²⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 301.

²⁹⁰ For a fuller discussion of the implications of Arendt’s views on rights –in particular ‘the right to have rights’ –see P Birmingham, 2006, *passim*.

²⁹¹ She did not originate the term.

she has followed the events that brought us to where we are now.

Part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*'s lasting importance lies in the way she allows certain themes to crystallise, as it were, from the historical-analytical narrative. These themes have enormous contemporary relevance, but it is important to see that one cannot simply read off what she has to say about, for instance, totalitarian modes of thought and apply them to phenomena like the rise of religious extremism in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century. That would be quite 'unArendtian', for one thing. Her practice is to try to understand phenomena without simply applying the inherited categories of the past, to what happens now in a series of determinate judgments. For Arendt the path of thinking and judgment must remain free from the mechanistic application of categories. Nonetheless, as she was clearly aware, in order to think responsibly about the present we must make the 'backward glance' to our history in order to establish the framework for any meaning we are to find in what happens. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is that backward glance (as is her 'return to Kant', in a different key). If, then, we would look back to Hannah Arendt, it must be to emulate her in this, and not to imitate her phrases and categories when we are talking about contemporary problems.²⁹² The former approach means the use of tools for thought; the latter is a simulacrum of thinking. Our question, then, might be: what aspects of the contemporary situation still display characteristics we can trace back to what we find in her account? It is an account which is not limited to the period 1914-1945, but pursues a number of themes back to the nineteenth century and beyond, into the making of late 'enlightenment' political modernity.²⁹³ Beyond that, we want to see what these issues mean for 'judgment', the concept that will come to play such a leading role in her work

²⁹² A good example of Arendt herself avoiding set categories and thinking/judging reflectively is to be found in her account of the Eichmann trial. See Villa, 1999, pp. 103-106 on this.

²⁹³ Canovan recognises this kind of point – that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is about much more than totalitarianism per se. This is why I find it puzzling that she spends so much time looking into the unpublished work by Arendt on the supposed Marx-totalitarianism link (an entire chapter of her book on Arendt) See Canovan, 1992 pp. 63-99.

after the Eichmann trial.

There is a central ‘problematic’ that emerges from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and the issues she discusses tend to revolve around it. This problematic can be approached from two aspects. First is ‘spatial’, to do with location or *topos*. It is the question of what it is to have lost a home in the world, a relatively stable structure that would enable individuals to recognise themselves and others. The other is to do with historical time, and the way the past and future connect in a lived present. Here the question is one of coming to terms with a tradition, and its relation to the inventive capacity of the human to bring something new into the world. Arendt will come to argue that the manner in which expression and recognition of self and others happens is through thinking, acting and judging; but this can only occur in what I am calling a ‘topos’ of judgment — a finite, bounded space which is at once metaphorical (the “space” of judgment, the public realm) and actual (states with borders, laws etc). This occurs at a particular historical conjuncture: following a catastrophe. The stability of the *topos* of the public and political allowed the individual to become citizen, to transcend mere animal givenness; the drive to movement without goal, characteristic of totalitarianism obliterates the context in which thinking, acting and judging could occur.²⁹⁴

So there is a contrast between two ‘resultless’ phenomena: one is the resultlessness of perpetual restless movement which is essentially nihilistic (it is movement, or flight, that has only movement as its principle); the other is the thing that we lack: the kind of non-instrumental thinking and acting which is the antithesis of nihilism because it is the indispensable factor in living a life which has intrinsic meaning, a kind of political existentialism. The continuing importance of her thought here, lies in part because in fact the nihilistic ‘movement without goal’ did not cease with the fall of the classic

²⁹⁴ See Dietz on this in Villa, 2000 pp. 86-102. See also Parekh, S, 2008, *passim* for the link between ‘publicness’ and visibility on the one hand, and the status of citizen possessing rights.

‘totalitarian’ regimes in 1945 and 1989. It is also more generally characteristic of modernity. So this is a narrative that emphasises loss and privation. Her later work will pick this theme up, but modulating, as it were, from the minor into the major key. There is a unique opportunity here for those of us who follow the disaster, if we will but think.

From the very first pages of the section, with its presentation of Hitler’s table talk as the ‘chaos of opinion’ with a ‘lack of discerning judgment’ onwards, Arendt shows how the mob that bayed for Dreyfus’ blood has become a mass; how bourgeois modernity, with its atomisation, anomie and instability, contributes to the predicament of the ‘lonely crowd’. In this context the characteristic epistemology of the mob member becomes general: a ‘cynical gullibility’ with its ‘anything may be true/you can’t fool me’ attitude.²⁹⁵ Also characteristic here is the ‘all is possible’ approach, with its ‘supreme contempt for all facts and all reality.’²⁹⁶ This is in part the effect of a retreat from a world in which there is a plurality of outlook and opinion, into the autism of the totalitarian system, and partly due to the reverence for power, and permanent dynamic destabilising force over mere facts (the approach that treats facts as something that can be created by will).²⁹⁷ In the slide from ‘everything is permitted’ to ‘everything is possible’ it is the latter that truly eludes the grasp of common sense. Moreover, the effect of the retreat from a shared world is that there is a loss of common sense itself: there can be no ‘affirmation and comprehension’ of others where the ideological super-sense has displaced ordinary notions of publicness and veridicality – and lawfulness. The effect is one of a total extinction of the interspaces that make public political life possible:

It substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality has disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions. To abolish the fences of laws between men-as tyranny does-- means to take away

²⁹⁵ Arendt, 1951 p. 342.

²⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 384.

²⁹⁷ See Parekh, S 2008 chapter 3 ‘The Common World’ for a discussion of the consequences of ‘worldlessness’ for human rights.

man's liberties and destroy freedom as a living political reality; for the space between men as it is hedged in by laws, is the living space of freedom.²⁹⁸

Totalitarianism's 'stringent logicity', a mode of 'thinking' which is independent of experience, from which thus nothing can be learned, transcends mere reality. Totalitarianism precludes freedom, and thus the possibility of genuine spontaneity in the creation of something new. Arendt points out that totalitarianism bases itself on loneliness, loneliness defined by her as a loss of self and world, of thought and experience. The individual is homeless in the world, unable to trust her senses because common sense implies others, and she is unable to share a world with others. In the end the topos that is paradigmatic of this totalitarianism is the camp, the place of final abjection, loss of dignity and life.

In Arendt's account we see repeatedly the way in which certain currents and tendencies in modernity become exaggerated and then transformed under totalitarian rule into something extreme and terrible, but still recognisable *as* a metamorphosis from the bourgeois society that preceded it.²⁹⁹ The Scientism prevalent in modernity might well be a degraded kind of instrumental thinking, in which results are sought rather than meaning, but totalitarianism transforms all thought into a kind of self-validating system, proceeding without reference to anything beyond itself. The difference here is that scientism retains some notion of goal or interest, while totalitarianism sweeps this away, replacing it with the nihilism of movement for its own sake. Judgment may have been imperilled by bourgeois modernity but in totalitarian regimes it is finally abandoned: the

²⁹⁸ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 466.

²⁹⁹ Villa gives a partially satisfactory account, but misses Arendt's main point: see Villa, 1999, P. 199. He wonders why Arendt did not give a positive account of liberal rights, conflating them with bourgeois hypocrisy etc. His answer is in part that she was acting as a typical Weimar intellectual, (i.e. mandarin outlook, insufficiently impressed with liberal democracy etc.) also that her account was focused on the phenomenon of 'worldlessness' created by totalitarianism. For Villa, her focus on this blinded her to the positive role that rights and constitutional frameworks have in liberal society. But this is clearly not right. Leaving aside the *ad hominem* point about Weimar, we see in Arendt a very clear appreciation of the role of rights. It runs through *The Origins of Totalitarianism* like a red thread. What Villa doesn't want to acknowledge, I'd suggest, is that Arendt is clear that the dynamism of the bourgeoisie undermines the very 'republican' institutions of the enlightenment. The advent of totalitarianism is prepared by bourgeois modernity: the two cannot be separated. Modern liberal rights and freedoms are thus still vulnerable to the economic activity that eliminates public political space.

Fascist and Stalinist totalitarianisms substitute supra-human principles for judgment. In the case of the Nazi regime, it is nature that speaks through the infallible leader, while with Soviet communism it is history. In both cases, the infallible leader acts as the conduit between the nonhuman arbiter of collective destiny and the mass movement he inspires. What are entirely done away with are all the features that characterise actual politics: provisionality based on lack of certainty, plurality, facts, fallibility, etc. The five senses become no guide: only the 'prophetic scientificity' that the homeless masses demand can determine 'truth'.³⁰⁰

Arendt's account is of a retreat from the open space of political republicanism into a closed system of the mass, a movement which is also from light to dark in the sense that it is only in the former that individuals can appear to each other through judgment, action and speech (itself here, a kind of act). The indispensable precursor and companion of judgment is authentic thinking, authentic because it is unaccompanied by any certainty. This kind of thinking is 'resultless' in another sense, quite different to totalitarian pseudo-thought. For Arendt, the thinking that is non-instrumental and resultless helps us orient ourselves in our world, while what passes for thinking is all too often the mere application of rule or decree. This simulacrum cannot satisfy the demand that one use imagination to weigh the different perspectives of others sharing the same political space. Cynicism and gullibility and contempt for mere facts mark the destruction of that space, and its replacement by the dynamism and instability of permanent movement.

If 'space' is construed as the context in which individuals can appear to each other, then institutions provide the essential markers or boundaries which provide the necessary

³⁰⁰ What we *don't* get from Arendt, again, is a fully satisfactory account of ideology. For Arendt, the term denotes the closed kind of thinking that imposes pattern and suppresses thought and judgment. Provided we read it in this way, we shall see what she means. This is not, of course, a very sophisticated account of what ideology is, and its use in this form is arguably quite 'ideological' itself. Commentators like Villa use it in the same way, unfortunately: See Villa, 1999, chapter 4, *passim*.

perspective.³⁰¹ Institutions divide and mark out the *topos* of judgment, allowing one thing to seem more significant than other, providing a way in which the multitude can process the complexity of modern life. Without such institutions, we have undifferentiated mass, and in totalitarianism it is a mass in constant movement, a mass of lonely individuals, deprived of the possibility of being more than anonymous atoms. The value of the enlightenment promise was of a post-medieval structure in which one would be able to find oneself and others. The collapse of this structure left no place in which *zōē* (bare life) could become *bios* (political, collective citizenry).³⁰² The paradox is that mere movement eliminates the possibility of genuine spontaneity. For Arendt, political public life is reliant on a kind of fragile eco-system and without it, both ‘common sense’ and the resultless thinking of the individual become impossible.³⁰³ They are replaced by the pseudoscientific / mystical ‘super-sense’ of the totalitarian system:

Terror is the realisation of the law of movement; its chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or of history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous human action [...] The rulers themselves do not claim to be just or wise, but only to execute historical or natural laws; they do not apply laws, but execute a movement in accordance with its inherent law. Terror is lawfulness, if law is the law of the movement of some supra-human force, Nature or History.³⁰⁴

For Arendt, *mediation* is a necessary feature of freedom. Only in a world in which our mere existence is marked and checked by law and institution can humans have a home: a place where past, present and future as well as self and others allow the disclosure of possibility, whose other name is ‘natality’. So the role of reflective judgment is to bring the moment where self meets others into focus. Without it, we have only the

³⁰¹ See Villa, 1999 pp. 128-154 for a persuasive account of what Arendt means by to appear in judgment. Villa invokes Sennett (c.f. Sennett, 2003) to defend a view of worldliness as a kind of theatricality, in which to be in public is to adopt a mask. Villa argues that Benhabib et. al. are mistaken in assuming a split between an ‘associational’, communicative sense to judgment versus a ‘romantic’ ‘expressivist’ one (in which ‘great acts’ are celebrated). Rather, Villa points to the influence of Montesquieu in Arendt’s sense of what it is to act on principle in the public sphere. Our modern problem is the loss of a sense of what it is to be in public in a way that does not seek to project intimacy or ‘character’ to a passive audience.

³⁰² C.f. Agamben 1978, *passim* for a long consideration on these themes, which he links to Arendt and Foucault.

³⁰³ See Brenkman, 2007 pp. 56-7.

³⁰⁴ Arendt, 1951 p. 465.

loneliness of mass man, driven by a Great Leader, terror or bureaucratic decree. And this is not something we became free of in 1945, or with the death of Stalin, or the fall of the Berlin wall. The thought here is that these nihilistic strains in modernity are still effecting a slow strangulation of meaningful public life.³⁰⁵ It is a grim prospect. Yet Arendt ends *The Origins of Totalitarianism* with a kind of hope: ‘every end contains a beginning’. Arendt’s examination of these ‘beginnings’, and the hope they bring, was to be the developing project in the period following *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.³⁰⁶

The Human Condition

Turning to *The Human Condition* (1958) we see Arendt’s thinking in a slightly altered light.³⁰⁷ Some of these differences are less important than they seem, and concern her angle of approach to the same set of problems as in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. For instance, the text of *The Human Condition* is more obviously ‘conceptual’: the book is organised around a series of conceptual distinctions: labour, work and so on, rather than a historical narrative. So it seems quite different to the rambling, discursive, incremental book that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* had become. But just as that book was too analytical and ‘interpretative’ to be the historical account that its title might have encouraged one to expect, so *The Human Condition* is still concerned with the historical fate of these categories outlined on the contents page. For Arendt, *thinking* and *thinking what happened* go together. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* the historical account seemed to generate reflections on freedom, plurality and public life; in *The Human Condition* the analysis begins with certain concepts which are then seen in their historical context: their fate, as it were. Arendt called this ‘conceptual analysis’. She grounds the concepts in their

³⁰⁵ See Villa, 1995 pp. 269-70. Here Villa presents a more chastened – and ‘Arendtian’ – picture of the virtues of liberalism as a bulwark against the loss of the political and the growth of worldlessness –contrast this with Villa, 1999 p. 199.

³⁰⁶ But see Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* 1994 for consideration of her thought that undervalues the role *The Origins of Totalitarianism* plays in Arendt’s thought. He mainly discusses her work from 1958 onwards.

³⁰⁷ For an interesting essay length discussion of *The Human Condition* see Frampton, pp. 101-127 in Hill, 1979.

historical context and then traces how they have changed, and in doing this gives us a sharper sense of the forces that have shaped the way we currently interpret our world. In this she is, as she said herself, a kind of phenomenologist, as she is trying to grasp where concepts come from – what kinds of concrete historical and political experience gave rise to them, and then how they have come to change for us, with all the confluences, amnesia and metamorphoses that go with the historical fate of concepts. It would be too much to say that *The Human Condition* is a result or distillation of the thinking in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but it is surely the case that the latter book is unimaginable without its predecessor.³⁰⁸

I shall not attempt to cover all of the ideas in this book, so fertile in ideas and lines of thought.³⁰⁹ Instead, after a brief outline of the book's main concerns, I shall focus on those key concerns for the question of judgment, and the way in which it presents the relation between history and 'political space' or *topos*. This relation is made explicit in *The Human Condition* and it is here Arendt performs her task 'to think what we are doing', wherever that may take her. Our aim is to keep in view Arendt's developing project, one that almost unfolds without any programme, as it were. Pursuing matters in this way helps us to see why a concern with plurality and its historical and topological rootedness in a state would be the precursor to the growing importance of Kant, who bulks so large in her thinking from the time of the Eichmann trial onwards. The larger point here is

³⁰⁸ Canovan makes much of the unpublished studies Arendt made of Marx in the period between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*: the book on Marx that Arendt never wrote. Despite the chapter in her book ('Totalitarian elements in Marxism'), Canovan herself admits that Arendt's view of Marx is ambivalent, rather than hostile, and stems from his failure, in Arendt's view, to be radical *enough* in freeing himself from the categories of thought he had inherited from the tradition. The critique of Marx, according to Canovan, revolves mainly around Marx's failure to see the difference between labour and work and his denigration of the political, as such, as well as the view of history that she thinks he inherited from Hegel (Canovan admits that she is following Arendt's interpretation of Marx, rather than considering the accuracy of that interpretation, and I will avoid this issue, too, only noting that 'Arendt's Marx' is at some remove from Marx himself, in many respects). In my view Arendt has seen something important in the way in which political philosophers have neglected to grasp the nature of political action; on the other hand, as we shall see, Arendt herself comes to have problems with the politics/labour dichotomy that she seeks to establish. As for 'Totalitarianism', I am unconvinced by the thesis implied by Canovan's chapter title: Arendt had come to see a problem in the project of modernity that went beyond the concerns laid out in the last chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Perhaps the fact that Arendt never wrote the book on Marx that Canovan discusses supports my point here: it is irrelevant. See Canovan, pp. 63-99.

³⁰⁹ See Zaretsky's discussion of Arendt on the public/private distinction for some interesting new lights she cast on old issues in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere: pp. 207-229 in Calhoun & McGowan 1997.

that attention to the notion of reflective judgment opens up Arendt's sense of what politics is and where it might be heading, as well as what thought must do truly to engage with the modern political condition: a new science of politics.

So despite the title, she is not trying to describe some timeless framework for all human activity and thought. The concepts have a history, a narrative that we must read if we are properly to understand them: 'only that which has no history can be defined,' to recall Nietzsche again. The aim is understanding, not simple definition of concepts. So Arendt takes it that she is analysing 'general human capacities' which grow out of the human condition, but she is tracing them back from what she calls our modern 'world alienation' in order to grasp the kind of society we have now. We might think of this tracking of concepts as a kind of 'parallax' move, as when certain fixed features appear to move as the viewer, the subject, changes position. This would only be partly right, as here the things themselves must also change as they are understood and used in new ways. However, they only reveal what they are to us when we have seen where they have been: in this sense Arendt is a kind of genealogist, as well as a phenomenologist. Her task is to consider *how things have come to appear to us in this way*. We should also note her explicit decision not to discuss thinking in the book (although the book is an example of that very thing, of course); still less will she feature judgment (it is not even in the index) – but it is everywhere prefigured.

The text is of importance to us partly because of its more explicit ordering of key terms, such as *private, social, political*, etc. *The Human Condition* presents them as a constellation or set, in which the terms affect each other as they are altered themselves. They provide a conceptual apparatus for thinking about politics, specifically political change and history. Arendt begins here to clarify the terms that will allow her to complete the diagnosis of the condition of political modernity that was begun in *The*

Origins of Totalitarianism and be completed in *On Revolution*. It would be wrong to think of them as a trilogy, but they do seem to continue the same line of inquiry. In effect, they perform the important function of a preliminary diagnosis of the state of political modernity, and thus are an essential precursor to any prognosis. Arendt develops a conception of politics as a shared activity of disclosure and possibility, of judgment and action; *The Human Condition* examines the *mise en scene* for the actors. Taken together, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution* give a partial, selective but nonetheless quite persuasive historical investigation of the passage into modernity of our political ideas and practices. To 'think what we are doing' here is to reflect on how we got where we are now, what got lost or effaced on the way and what we might yet achieve. That which is of permanent importance to humans is seen in the context of the historically shifting perspectives and contingencies of a developing modernity.

The Human Condition is structured in what looks like a much more lucid manner than *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt opens with her account of the public/private distinction; she then moves to the triptych of labour, work and action, where we see how each term has changed in its significance and meaning in relation to the others. *The Human Condition* ends on the *vita activa* and the modern world, where Arendt makes the claim that *world alienation* characterises modernity. She gives an account of the invasion of the political by a new realm: the 'social'. The 'three fundamental human activities: labour, work and action'³¹⁰ are her crucial categories here. *Labour* involves the perpetual struggle to maintain life in the face of the natural realm, to which we are enslaved: the realm of necessity. The toil performed under this heading is strictly futile, as it leaves nothing permanent behind it, its repetitive character mirroring the cycles of nature, of biology. It is the corollary of our nature as creatures that sense. *Work* is the corollary of our capacity to have

³¹⁰ Arendt, 1958 p. 71.

images: designing and making (*poiesis*). It is the unnatural activity of creating a world, as distinct from the inhuman cycles of the earth: a home, permanence, or a kind of second nature produced from the mastering of the first nature. *Action* is what occurs between human beings, corresponding to the plural nature of the human condition; with speech it reveals 'the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.'³¹¹ Human plurality has the two aspects of equality and distinction: the former allows us to understand each other, the latter gives us something to understand: *someone* is revealed who is not oneself. Action is the activity of the political par excellence, and it is the activity most closely allied with natality. Birth brings a new, unique human into the world, a newcomer who can initiate action, that is, beginning anew.

The political is the space in which speech and action appear. Meaning is thus tied to what appears, to the public dimension, which is enfolded in the (relatively) permanent world of *homo faber*, and sustained by the incessant struggles of *animal laborans*. It is in action and speech, then, that the human reveals herself, through the performatives that only the human can enact. Arendt cites forgiveness and promising as paradigmatic actions: the former capable of undoing the past, the latter binding the future, and both lifting the human world out of the play of the arbitrary and the unfree. For Arendt, freedom is acting in public, from principle, and nothing could be more distant from the behaviour of mass society, which is measured by statistics and predicted by pollster; indeed, action is essentially unpredictable as the actor initiates events but cannot necessarily bring them to completion herself. The true meaning of action (*praxis*) is only revealed retrospectively, through narration (*poiesis*, *homo faber*), which redeems action from

³¹¹ Ibid. P 176. Arendt's interest in the meaning of action and the creation of the genuinely new in concert with others reaches far back to earliest writing: her doctoral dissertation on St Augustine (*Love and St Augustine* 1929/1996). For a discussion of the way in which this work links to the themes present in her later texts, see Kampowski, 2008, *passim*.

..its inherent unpredictability. This is not simply a question of inability to foretell all the logical consequences of a particular act, in which case an electronic computer would be able to foretell the future, but arises directly out of the story which, as the result of action, begins and establishes itself as soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past...its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended [...] Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian...³¹²

Modernity has seen the collapse of work and action into labour, and this shift takes the form of the rise of the category of the social, or more specifically in our century, 'consumer society'. 'All that is solid melts into air'. Wealth as fixed property (e.g. land, buildings) is replaced by the accumulation of wealth, and the manufacture of handicrafts by mass production in a shift from artifact to consumable. This is the logic of *homo laborans*, in which the world becomes pure means, the triumph of what had been the lowest stage in the hierarchy. 'Pure means' because the aims of labour are neither the creation of something permanent (the end of *homo faber*) nor the space in which human uniqueness and plurality appear in the light of the political. Action (the unique individual appearing with others) is reduced to behaviour, politics to 'collective housekeeping' (the rise of economic man as triumph of the *oikos* over *polis*). Another word for this is nihilism, a nihilism not brought about by a loss of faith in a supreme Being, leading to a decline in the observance of certain moral rules (along the lines of Dostoevsky's 'if there is no God, everything is permitted'), but rather one in which meaning has been abolished by means-end rationality that knows no final term; only a chain of means, stretching into a bad infinity. This is radical meaninglessness.

Arendt's presentation of the private/public distinction grounds itself in the

³¹² Arendt, 1958 p. 191-21.

account of the vicissitudes of the *vita activa*. This latter is the account of a dimension of human life which she takes explicitly from her reading of character of the ancient *polis*, and which she takes to be central to the meaning of politics:³¹³

Action, the only activity which goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* conditionof all political life³¹⁴

In action, people confront each other without any intermediary. Unlike the dimension of labour, which is concerned with the production of the necessities of life, or of work, which is concerned with making things, there is an immediacy to action which makes it the political category. This immediacy comes from the fact that it presupposes plurality: the context of action is the witness borne by others. Plurality is the condition of human action because each human is an unprecedented, unrepeatable, unique thing. Our 'shared humanity' is our common experience of uniqueness.³¹⁵ *Action discloses who one is to the others.*³¹⁶ In acting, the unique one that each of us is, initiates, founds and is the precondition for history. Whether or not the action one commits is successful in its aims or not (and Arendt is clear that it very often does not), it is through action that something new can occur: 'action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality', and this makes natality, for Arendt, the key concept of politics:

³¹³ Canovan is right to insist, however, that Arendt's interest in the ancient *polis* in no way qualifies as a nostalgia for ancient political life in that polis. Arendt is quite critical of that world. See Canovan, p. 137.

³¹⁴ Arendt, 1958 p. 7.

³¹⁵ See Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994 p. 161.

³¹⁶ But see Villa, 1999, pp. 128-155 on why this is a 'theatrical' discourse, involving masks rather than essential selves. His view seems more plausible for the twenty-first century than the more 'essentialist' position of Hinchman and Hinchman, See: Hinchman and Hinchman 1994, p. 161.

..since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.³¹⁷

Action, then, offers the opening to the radically new. These formulations provoke further questions, not all of which Arendt answers satisfactorily. What is action for? Where is the public realm, and why can it not include the arenas in which labour and capital come into conflict, such as the factory? How relevant is ‘greatness’ to modern life? She is surely on to something important here. The scene of the political as a scene of disclosure of the actor, politics as a core activity of human self realisation: these notions recover an ancient idea of the centrality of the political, as well as developing a modern notion of natality. This new is the realm of freedom and, as we shall see, it implies a certain set of enabling conditions, which are quite fragile. The difficulty, though, is the continuing question of the relation of the political –the place of judgment –to the social and the economic. Arendt is offering us a kind of political ontology, but without enough information about the relation of the political to the rest of life. To declare economic and social conditions as inherently *unpolitical* as she seems to do, is untenable, as it would seem to place the injustice and oppression in those walks of life beyond the range of judgment.³¹⁸ So the question is how we should think about their relationship. To anticipate a little, I shall later argue that the *sensus communis* of judgment can only be plausible for modernity as the image of a free and equal citizenry; this is the aspiration of the struggles to liberate humans from the unfreedom of social and economic oppression and inequality. It is *emergent*: the struggle to be accorded the dignity of equal recognition and full participation in a political community is the struggle towards a non-exclusive *topos* of judgment and action.

³¹⁷ Arendt, 1958 p. 9.

³¹⁸ And creates the further problem of what all the judging and acting are supposed to be about, once one has subtracted everything loosely defined as ‘social’ or ‘economic’.

To return to Arendt's account in *The Human Condition*: a large part of the argument is concerned to show how the private has encroached on the 'public' realm of action.³¹⁹ The former is the zone of man as *homo economicus*, the place of producing, reproducing, consuming, getting and spending, which she calls *homo laborans*. *Homo laborans* is associated with necessity, not freedom, the endless cycle of labour that keeps the biological creature alive. According to Arendt, in contrast with the ancient Greeks, we now see it as the predominant aspect of the human condition. This is as true for Marx as for Adam Smith: man is *homo laborans*.³²⁰ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* we saw the 'bourgeois spirit' of endless acquisition of property and the endless expansion of wealth, as it fuelled imperialism and disintegrated the nation states of the revolutionary age. Here we see it in its 'philosophical' aspect as the elevation of comfort as the highest value, and the categorisation of all activities as either useful or playful (e.g. hobbies) (rather like the passive nihilism of Nietzsche's 'Last Man'). From this consumerism a 'waste economy' results, in which everything is to be devoured or discarded.³²¹

The next category is work, the dimension of *homo faber*. The first, positive account is of the world that *homo faber* makes; it is one of relative permanence in which it is possible to attain a distance and objectivity about nature. Arendt reminds us of another

³¹⁹ For deeply critical accounts of Arendt's views on action versus the 'private' or economic realm see Pitkin 'Justice: On Relating Private and Public,' pp. 261-288 and Wolin, 'Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political' pp.289 -306 both in Hinchman & Hinchman 1994.

³²⁰ Canovan argues that Marx's supposed determinism as well as his failure to distinguish political action from work and labour made Marxism vulnerable to proto-totalitarian currents in modernity. Canovan explicitly avoids discussing the accuracy of Arendt's reading of Marx, and so I will do likewise. But it seems to me that she has certainly misunderstood Marx on the 'determinism' question; with the work/labour issue, Arendt's 'misreading', if it is one, is quite creative and productive –it allows her to think creatively about politics in a way that is quite original. See chapters 3, 4 and 5 *passim* in Canovan 1992 for Canovan's thoughts on the way in which Arendt interpreted Marx. And see also Parekh on Arendt and Marx in Hill 1979 pp. 67-100. Recent discussions of the status of 'production' and 'labour' in Marx have suggested that the a-historical elevation of labour belongs to Marx's earlier work (pre 1850s) –see Postone, 1996, *passim*. For an illuminating discussion of the implications of this question of the role of 'labour' see Žižek, 2010, chapter 3, *passim*. So it looks as if Arendt was on to something when she identified the 'labour' theme in Marx as connected to the totalitarian destiny of Marxism in 'really existing socialism'. If Arendt misreads Marx, she is in good company as it is precisely this 'productivist', technocratic reading of Marx that has dominated much Marxist scholarship. Marx himself seems to have shed this approach with his analysis of the commodity-form in *Capital*. See also Hansen, 1993 for an intelligent discussion of the relation between Marx and Arendt (pp. 14-49)

³²¹ See *The Human Condition* p. 133-135. For an extended, critical account of Arendt's views on 'the social' see Pitkin's *The Attack of the Blob* (Pitkin H, 1998, *passim*). She sees Arendt as having made a serious mistake in her characterisation of the social. For Pitkin, it would be better to re-characterise the growth of the social less as a question of ontology (a form of being), and more as one of discourse – a way of confronting or failing to confront our responsibility as actors.

side to *homo faber*: that of the maker of art and culture in general. *Homo faber* makes laws, novels, poems, walls (literal and metaphorical). This is the durable human artifice without which the memory of human action would be lost. However, the evaluation of *homo faber* is always that of means–ends rationality; its philosophy is utilitarianism and the calculation of profit and loss. As with *homo laborans*, the upshot of this perspective, if it becomes dominant, is nihilism. In politics it is the ‘active nihilism’ of the one who announces that you can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs, forgetting the perspective of the eggs (c.f. her essay ‘The Eggs Speak Up’).³²²

In time all these categories have changed their importance for humanity. The effect has been the squeezing out of action by work and labour, with the latter as the main beneficiary of the changes in relative importance. We might ask what the problem is with this outcome. What is wrong is that action is the thing that reveals *who* one is, not *what* one is: not the accidents of talent, etc. For her, politics is the precious context for their self-disclosure, rooted in the interaction of unique standpoints in a shared world. We note the recurrence of the spatial metaphor in her discussions of this issue. This possibility of self-disclosure is crucial for human meaning, and it relies on a web, or pre-existing matrix, from which can emerge the new, which is also accountable to what went before. Rather than seeing Arendt’s interest in action as disclosure as the political existentialism of the *acte gratuit* it might be better to recall Arendt’s self-ascription as a *political phenomenologist*.

Action is often frustrated, and its meaning is often only grasped retrospectively.

³²² In Arendt, 1994. Arendt’s view of Marx was that he –in Villa’s words – ‘utterly conflates labour and work’ and moreover makes the mistake of seeing *praxis* in terms of *homo faber* (violent making). There is something in this, and it is the notion of labour and domination of nature that has led Postone, Žižek and Holloway to re think (in their different ways) Marx’s legacy. Arendt, though, was concerned to keep a sense of action as a distinct dimension of plurality, apart from the *oikos*. This is her genuine contribution to modern political thought, but it also makes her vulnerable to questions about the line between labour and action. Is the factory, for instance, public or private? Is truly political action impossible there? Jameson suggests that its obviously ideological character limits the public action/private labour distinction. See Villa, 1999, Postone, 1996, Žižek, 2010 and Jameson, 2009 (p 353), as well as the final chapter of the present work.

Hence the importance of those examples of *homo faber*, the makers of stories, such as Homer and Thucydides. Action acquires meaning through its record in a stable human culture, and so the story of the new becomes the patrimony of later generations. This capability for natality is quite distinct from the 'capitalist new' of commodities, the false new that provokes but never satisfies desire in *homo laborans*.

Nihilism and 'Values'

Arendt's account of the loss of the political in the social has often been characterised as an essentially conservative nostalgia for the classical world, but there is no sense in *The Human Condition* that it is a world that we can somehow return to or recreate. It is, rather, as she says herself, an attempt to think what we are doing, the manner in which the modern world came to be as it is, and how it could come to be the cradle of a new form of oppression. This account is marked by a method that can be described as phenomenological: meaning appears through speech and action in the public space, and if this *topos* is lost then the multiple location of actors is erased and the result is that human meaningfulness is annihilated.³²³ Nihilism, the levelling of difference, follows the loss of the space of appearance. What was the place of illumination, of speech and action, is changed to acquiescence in

a dazed, "tranquillised," functional type of behaviour. The trouble with modern theories of behaviourism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they are the best possible conceptualisations of certain obvious trends in modern society. It is quite conceivable that the modern age - which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity - may end in the deadliest, most sterile

³²³ On the influence of Jaspers' *existenz* philosophy of the concept of 'meaning' see Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994 p. 163.

passivity history has ever known³²⁴.

This is where what is lost is a kind of truth, which is authenticity, not fact. In place of the light of the public, disclosive realm of revelatory action, there is darkness, as Arendt later described in the forward to *Men In Dark Times*:

darkness has come when this light is extinguished ...by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality³²⁵

In this context, prating about the loss of moral absolutes and demands for a 'back to basics' in moral 'values' is part of the problem, not the solution. Arendt was shockingly clear that the realm of action is 'beyond good and evil' in the sense that true action reaches towards the genuinely new, which is always beyond moral judgment - and predictability. It can only be judged in terms of greatness.³²⁶ This is why there is no entry in the index under 'justice' or 'morality'. Behaviour is subject to moral law, to *mores*.³²⁷ Its essence is the following of rule and custom, to being 'normal' (this has an important bearing, of course, on Arendt's discussion of the behaviour of Nazi functionaries). Arendt is not advocating a return to the ancient *polis*, but her investigation into the metamorphosis of the political into the social raises the more profound question of the springs of human meaningfulness, of being at home in the world, and of making the new. But this account does not imply nostalgia for the 'Great

³²⁴ Arendt, 1958 p. 322.

³²⁵ *Men in Dark Times*, Viii.

³²⁶ C.f. Arendt, 1958 p. 205.

³²⁷ On this, see Hinchman & Hinchman 1994, p. 156.

Tradition'. Western tradition was quite capable of misunderstanding and fleeing from the essence of human freedom, as she makes clear in *The Human Condition*. The human actor, as we have seen, may be said to be free in the sense of having a capacity to initiate beginnings, but she is not sovereign: she cannot carry through the action she began alone, without the help of others, much less predict or control the outcome of those actions, which entangle the actor, now sufferer, in a web of unintended consequences and relationships. So if freedom is identified with sovereignty ('the ideal of uncompromising self sufficiency and mastership') then we are unfree, as Stoicism charged.³²⁸ But this lack of sovereignty arises from the fact that there is human plurality: much of the tradition, and Stoicism in particular, retreats from the realm of acting-with-others into the illusory freedom of purely mental liberation. If moderns repeat the misidentification of freedom with sovereignty they accuse human reality of 'absurdity', a despair that most often leads them to try to

return to 'religious values' which, however, have no root any longer in authentic religious experiences or faith, but are like all modern spiritual 'values', exchange values obtained in this case for the discarded 'values' of despair³²⁹.

The tradition (which was in any case often deeply flawed in its understanding of freedom) can offer us no way back from our current predicaments; indeed, we must be on our guard not merely to repeat the failed interpretations of the past (e.g. Stoicism) under a different name. Again, we should note the movement of Arendt's thought: she is trying to think what would be the authentic response to the epoch that we are now in, rather than advocate the return to a previous

³²⁸ Arendt, 1958, p. 234.

³²⁹ Ibid. p. 235.

(deeply flawed) tradition.³³⁰ If we try to do the latter, all we do is play the false game of 'values', which can be adopted or discarded as exigency or fashion dictate (rule of the market). 'Values-talk' arises in the modern epoch when people try to 'adopt or 'return to' a set of beliefs that are no longer rooted in their actual experience of the world (by definition, or they wouldn't be 'adopting' them). The language of 'values' is itself deeply compromised by the market attitude from whence it was derived: all 'values' are exchange values, to be adopted and - by implication - exchanged for others when convenient. Arendt's hostility to values-talk stems from her appreciation that it is part of the victory of labour - of *animal laborans* - over work and action. Values are part of the liquefaction of a durable human world in which people act and judge. They 'show up' as a kind of bad faith: neither locatable as the act nor work of a human agent.

In considering the alternative to this view (humanity as absurd because not sovereign), Arendt makes her only reference to Kant in *The Human Condition*:

Where human pride is still intact, it is tragedy rather than absurdity, which is taken to be the hallmark of human existence. Its greatest representative is Kant, to whom the spontaneity of acting, and the concomitant faculties of practical reason, including force of judgment, remain the outstanding qualities of man, even though his action falls into the determinism of natural laws and his judgment cannot penetrate the secret of absolute reality (the *Ding an sich*). Kant had the courage to acquit man from the consequences of his deed, insisting solely on the purity of his motives, and this saved him from losing faith in man and his potential greatness.³³¹

The loss of sovereignty implies a tragic fate: just as labour toils unceasingly

³³⁰ This helps to explain why Arendt is relying on (futural) reflective judgment and not on Aristotelian *phronesis* in thinking what we are doing. See d'Entreves, 1995 pp. 122-123.

³³¹ Arendt, 1958 p. 235.

against the unending demands of our biological nature, and work tries to shore up our frail world against time and decay, so the actor, doomed in the end to play the role of sufferer, acts in freedom, only to see his deed swept away from him by melancholy haphazardness. His greatness is that he acts anyway, even though he will be defeated. Kant is important to Arendt because of his emphasis in *The Critique of Judgment* on the judgment of that which appears in the intersubjective realm of appearance. His thinking connects with Arendt's sense of the tragic nature in human life and, in *The Critique of Judgment*, with Arendt's phenomenological approach to meaning-as-appearance in the public space. The backward look of the judge, like the storyteller, will be the only sign of hope and remembrance available for the actor, and this hope, that human life has a meaning under and beyond judgment, is one that the scientist cannot provide.

The book ends on an account, which we shall not follow in detail here, of what she calls 'world alienation'. The evaporation of the *vita activa* and the supremacy of means-ends rationality result in the only true action that remains, according to Arendt. This is the 'acting into nature' of the scientist³³² There is a loss of common sense, i.e., the shared measure of evidence and criterion, and its replacement with reason. Instead of encountering each other existentially in action and speech, we only confront the minds of others. This is the victory of *homo laborans*, and the 'devaluation of all values', with the concomitant supremacy of behaviourism and social man.³³³

³³² Contemporary examples might include the development of GM crops, so-called 'nano-technology' and measures to halt or reverse global warming (if any such measures are ever found). Note the inherent unpredictability of such activities.

³³³ For an alternative account of the issues discussed above, see Habermas' essay 'Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power' in Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994 pp. 211-229. Habermas interprets Arendt's position as resting much more on Aristotle than I do.

This spectre of 'world alienation', is action deprived of its revelatory character by its very distance from the intersubjective *topos* of human plurality. She adds that nothing could be more mistaken than the idea that thinking, which she has not been concerned with so far, is invulnerable to the loss of political freedom. But it remains, she claims, as something possible where any freedom persists, and not merely for the few. Again, we see in *The Human Condition* the themes that were already apparent in 'Understanding and Politics', but which were to undergo further development in her later texts.

On Revolution

In May 1919 the remains of a woman were fished from the Landwehr canal in Berlin. The three doctors available must have suspected the identity of the corpse, as they refused to perform a post mortem on it. Identification was in any case made by examination of the clothes on the body. This had been Rosa Luxemburg.³³⁴ She had perished essentially because the leftist uprising in Berlin, initiated by her fellow Spartacist leader Karl Liebknecht without her agreement, had failed. Luxemburg, who had fiercely criticised the Bolshevik approach to revolution as dangerously authoritarian was clubbed and then shot to death by members of the *Freikorps*, whose repressive violence, not excluding their anti-Semitism, makes them fitting antecedents of the Nazis.

The great revolutions in 'The West' are often seen as turning points, thresholds, new stages in history, and their very dates have a kind of resonance: 1776, 1789 (or 1794), 1917, and so on. History, of course, may make us change our minds about the degree of success, the meaning, the import of those events, but they remain potent at least as symbols, whatever posterity's backward look of judgment may eventually be. But

³³⁴ For an interesting discussion of Rosa Luxemburg and Arendt, as well as of Arendt's views of Luxemburg's strengths and weaknesses see Isaac, 1992 pp. 89-90 and 143-4

there is a second sequence, of course, that of the failed revolutions: 1796, 1821, 1848, 1871, 1905, 1918, and 1956. These are the abortive revolutions and uprisings: attempts, perhaps, to restart Marx's locomotive of history (more appositely, perhaps, in Benjamin's reformulation, to try to bring it to a halt). This second list is the longer one, but like the successful revolutions, judgment about ultimate meaning, including the meaning of 'success' and 'failure', remain open to revision and reconsideration.

Of the revolutions that never were, it is the one that began in Germany in 1918 is most relevant to Hannah Arendt.³³⁵ Arendt, born in 1906, married to Heinrich Blucher (an ex Spartacist) has a biography and a set of concerns defined by the fate of Germany after 1918. Rosa Luxemburg's life and death – including the nature of the regime that connived in her murder – was the subject of an eloquent and moving essay by Arendt and published in *Men in Dark Times* in 1966. For all her criticism of Rosa Luxemburg's mistakes, it is clear that she stands as a kind of exemplar for Arendt (interestingly, she describes Rosa and her peer group as having 'moral taste').³³⁶ And Luxemburg's ideas about action and revolutions have a clear resonance for Hannah Arendt:

her insight into the nature of political action...[was] her most important contribution to political theory. The main point is that she had learned from the revolutionary workers' councils (the latter *Soviets*) that "good organisation does not precede action but is the product of it", that "the organisation of revolutionary action can and must be learned in revolution itself, as one can only learn swimming in the water", that revolutions are "made" by nobody but break out "spontaneously", and that "the pressure for action" always comes "from below". A revolution is "great and strong as long as the Social Democrats [at the time still the only revolutionary party] don't smash it up."³³⁷

³³⁵ If it had succeeded, if some kind of 'Red' government has seized *and kept hold* of power in the 1918-9 period, the effect on Germany, the nascent Soviet State in Russia, and the rest of the world would have been, one assumes, huge. But it failed, and Hitler and Stalin were the successors to that non-event

³³⁶ *Men in Dark Times*, p. 41.

³³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 52.

Arendt's *On Revolution*

As with any complex text one can read *On Revolution* in a number of different ways.³³⁸ But although the text will bear a number of diverse readings, not all of them, of course, are equally good.³³⁹ A certain way of reading this book is common, and I want to challenge it here. The kind of reading I have in mind is one that takes it that the book's conclusions about the historical success and failure of two revolutions are pretty clear, with the concomitant moral to be drawn about revolutions in general.³⁴⁰

On Revolution is famously dominated by an account of two revolutions, the French and the American. The former was overwhelmed by the demands of the poor (representing 'necessity', the 'rebellion of the belly'): an attempt to solve the social question, mass poverty, dooms the revolution, along with the Jacobin attempt to found a republic of virtue, which goes down in bloody terror. The postscript to this is the Russian revolution: taking its model from this event, rather than the one across the Atlantic, it repeats its story of terror and despotism. In contrast, the American Revolution is the success story: the founders, building on the foundations of prosperity already evident in the colonies, with their 'prefigurative forms' of meetings, autonomy and independent communities were able to aim at, in Jefferson's phrase, 'public happiness'. So the revolution here was founded, Arendt comments, by men through their pledges and promises. It did not just break out. The resulting institutions proved capable of preserving liberty after the founding fathers were in their graves. So goes the story of two revolutions, one failed and one successful.

The problem with this account of *On Revolution* is that it ignores the context of the

³³⁸ See Helmut Dubiel: 'Hannah Arendt and the Theory of Democracy' in Kielmansegg et. al. 1995, pp.11-28.

³³⁹ For a poor grasp, in my view, of what Arendt is getting at in this book see Kielmansegg's introduction to *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss*, eds Kielmansegg et. al. 1995, p 3.

³⁴⁰ For a discussion of how *On Revolution* is oddly placed in discussions of the American Revolution, and on divergent views of the book itself see P Markell 'The Experience of Action' in Berkowitz, et. al. 2010 pp. 95-102.

book (following hard on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* and continuing, but also transforming, many of their themes and categories).³⁴¹ *On Revolution* was written as part of Arendt's developing investigation into the relation between the tradition as transmitted to the present and the way in which that past is both received and mastered by the founding of the new, which in turn needs to be preserved into the future as a place in which freedom can persist.³⁴² A revolution is a characteristically modern form of that attempted event of founding and preserving human freedom. The enlightenment was, as Arendt comments in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, haunted by the problem of creating something new. In the modern age revolution no longer means the return to a previous state but the creation of something different. Perhaps we should think here not of creation, but rather *inventio*, invention, which recalled the mixed event in which something is discovered *and* made. The experience of making revolution taught men that they could consciously will the new.³⁴³ But the experience of the 'enlightenment', to be master of one's fate and beyond the tutelage of priest or aristocrat, arguably leads to a crisis of confidence, a kind of vertigo of freedom. So the men of the revolutions dress themselves in the trappings of the classical past, and deny that they are doing anything absolutely new.³⁴⁴

Considering the nature of a revolution was, for Arendt, another way of thinking about what it means to initiate when one has no rule or precedent.³⁴⁵ In such a case, one

³⁴¹ See Bernstein, J for an excellent appreciation of the role of *On Revolution* in Arendt's thought. He makes the point that *On Revolution* marks a move by Arendt into modernity, involving principles and promises. Civil disobedience, he argues, reveals the truth of revolutionary founding as always a refounding. See 'Promising and Civil Disobedience' in Berkowitz et. al. 2010, pp. 115-127.

³⁴² See Ingram D, 'Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Trial of (Post) Modernity or the Tale of Two Revolutions' in May and Kohn, 1996 for a discussion of the problem of founding in revolutions.

³⁴³ See *On Revolution* pp. 46-8.

³⁴⁴ See Canovan, 1992, pp. 218-223 for a good discussion of the way in which political foundation, although in practice needing no source of authority outside human political action, seems to need the support of some higher Law that would confer a legitimacy on what had been founded by people acting together. We could characterise this in the language of (Kantian) judgment as the disavowal of the origins of legislation in imagination (reflective judgment).

³⁴⁵ Canovan is right to identify this aspect as crucial to Arendt's thinking about politics. As she says, judgment is precisely what one needs if the application of moral criteria is inappropriate. Such criteria are not workable now, for the public sphere. I'd add that that is why it is reflective judgment that is the essential thing here as it features just when pre-existing rules and standards are lacking. See Canovan, p. 189.

cannot make a kind of determinate judgment in the manner of *homo faber* working from a pre-existing model. The revolutionary acts, and judges, ‘as if’ such a rule were present. Revolutions have the peculiarity of being unauthorised: they retrospectively authorise themselves, if they succeed, and as self-authorising has something scandalous about it, revolutionaries look backwards to past models even as they step forwards.³⁴⁶ Then the next difficulty successful revolutionaries faces is to found a structure that will preserve the freedom they have won.

Laws are congealed judgments. The difficulty is that the self-authorisation (and reflective judgment) of those who make the revolution is preserved for posterity as the inert Law of the Constitution. The experience of public happiness dies with the revolutionaries. Arendt’s strictures on the French and Russian Revolutions are well known: especially the delusion of the actors that a revolution had to be a violent event made inevitable by the ‘iron laws of history’, and in the aftermath, the failures in 1793 and 1920 to preserve the ‘spaces of freedom’. But we need to remember that the phrase ‘the lost treasure of the revolution’ applies to 1776 and to the USA. It was lost because ‘public happiness’ became confounded with the *private* pursuit of well-being. Happiness became identified with prosperity. If the dream of the poor of ‘endless consumption’ drowned the Revolution in France, it surely engulfed the American one as well. We can here separate Arendt’s comments in *Between Past and Future* and ‘Understanding and Politics’ of the ‘growth of stupidity’ in consumer culture from her more considered judgments in *On Revolution*. The lost treasure is public freedom; it has been conflated with private welfare and has now become a battle to preserve individuality in mass society.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁶ And so do those who resist them. A famous account is given by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* – which is the source of the famous remark that facts and personages in history occur twice – ‘the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce’. See Marx, 1977, Vol. 1, p. 398.

³⁴⁷ There is force in the criticism that Arendt damages her analysis of the unfreedom of modern capitalist-liberal societies by ruling the economic/social as pre-political, as we have seen. Economic power is associated with exploitation and the ‘private’ realm has a huge effect on the citizen’s freedom: the private here *is* political. The point is well made by d’Entreves, 1995 p 8 and pp. 58-63. Nonetheless, we can see her emphasis as a kind of necessary exaggeration, given the neglect of the political by other theorists.

Arendt's better thought is that the distinction between a state that is desirable because it preserves and promotes political freedom, and one that is effective in fulfilling the utilitarian goal of economic prosperity, has been obscured. She comments that American economic success is no proof of the superiority of the 'American way': that prosperity preceded 1776. Political freedom means 'the right to be a participator in government', or it means nothing.³⁴⁸ So the question would be: can we say that American citizens in the twenty-first century are politically free? Or is the USA essentially a polyarchy in which actual governing is the business of a self-replicating elite?³⁴⁹

Revolutions have two moments, Arendt notes, a radical moment and a conservative moment; one founds, the other preserves. In the wake of the American Revolution came a set of laws, grounded in a commitment to certain social values; in the French aftermath there was 'reaction', restoration and attempts to repeat the creative violence of 1789. For Arendt, the challenge for the revolutionary is to preserve a space for new free creative actions *after* the founding has been done, and so she ends *On Revolution* with a discussion of what she calls the only political form born of the revolutionary experience, the council movement.

If the aim of the revolution is freedom, then how can it be preserved?³⁵⁰ Arendt is clear that a structure, law, will be essential if this is to be achieved. She is also clear that true power is found in plurality, in citizens deliberating, judging and acting together in their unique ways. To solve the social question at the price of abolishing this and enthroning an alienated clique at the top is no solution at all. Brotherhood is no substitute for equality, and nor is liberty to pursue private ends a substitute for political

³⁴⁸ *On Revolution*, p. 218.

³⁴⁹ Canovan discusses Arendt's 'unwillingness to put her trust in liberal democracy' and her relation to the tradition of classical republicanism, with its sense of the tragic dimension of human affairs. Canovan, 1992 pp. 201-206.

³⁵⁰ Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is much concerned with the same problem. Another interesting parallel with Arendt – although conducted in a very different style – is that of 'existentialism politicised' around a Marxist problematic, in Sartre's case. See Sartre, 2004, book 2 ('the fused group' etc).

freedom.³⁵¹ As Jefferson noted, private interests are the great threat to public happiness. But this is precisely what the bourgeois wants from his government.³⁵²

The problem is political, and it transcends revolution. The lost treasure is also the free, happy, public citizen. The citizen, as a kind of Kantian judge, reveals who he is to others through word and deed in the dissensus of the political process. For Arendt it was the irruption of the council movement in the revolutions, without the authorisation of the political parties that kept the promise of politics. It was, we might remember here, Rosa Luxemburg's intuition that both the democratic centralism of the Bolsheviks and the bureaucratic system of the professional social democrats in Germany ran contrary to the 'project of autonomy' (to invoke Castoriadis' phrase).³⁵³ Political parties in the modern polyarchy respond to mood, not real opinions, according to Arendt. But Arendt's advocacy of a kind of council system involving a self-selecting elite is problematic.³⁵⁴ Here we seem to see again the split between the judges who constitute the *sensus communis* of true judgment, versus the common human understanding of the non-elect.³⁵⁵ This was not Luxemburg's view of the matter, but it remains to be seen whether any effective vehicle for the preservation of those spaces of freedom has been fashioned, or could be fashioned.³⁵⁶ They were not preserved by either of the two

³⁵¹ Arendt is no communitarian: warmth and naturalness are admirable in private life, but only tend to obscure what Richard Sennett calls the eighteenth century ideals of 'urbanity, formality and dignity,' as well as objectivity. See Sennett 2003 *passim* and Canovan, 1994, pp. 247-248.

³⁵² Canovan emphasises more than I do Arendt's continuing admiration for American freedom, but agrees that Arendt was concerned that the American public had too little to remind them that the purpose of public participation is more than the preservation /promotion of one's private interests, and were (are) using the ballot box for that purpose. Canovan, 1992 pp. 132.

³⁵³ See the chapter devoted to Luxemburg in *Men in Dark Times*: Arendt was clearly aware not only of Luxemburg's life and fate, but also her views on spontaneity, mass action and revolution. See Castoriadis, 1991 p. 20 ff for an initial definition of what he means, and also 1987 pp. 101-114 for a fuller, quite rigorous exposition. Castoriadis shares with Arendt a certain conception of the primacy of politics, a kind of anti-foundationalism and a commitment to a vision of *praxis* as creative of the new and unprecedented in human affairs. Reflective judgment should be understood as being at the heart of this creative process.

³⁵⁴ For a critical account of her view of the council movement – and her lack of understanding of the socialist goals of the historical examples she mainly cites, see Sitton, 'Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy' pp. 307-324 in Hinchman and Hinchman, 1994.

³⁵⁵ For a view that does not regard this as a problem, see Isaac, 'Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics' in Allen, 2008, pp. 115-130.

³⁵⁶ I do not share Canovan's view that Arendt lacked realism in being sceptical about the role of nationalism in modern political life and in her view that the future lies not with nation states, but with non-national forms (e.g. federations). It seems to me that Arendt was more prescient than Canovan, writing in 1992 allows. Canovan describes Arendt's

revolutions mainly discussed in *On Revolution*, and we should include their failure alongside that of the Bolsheviks when we read Arendt's appreciation of the fact that Rosa Luxemburg 'was far more afraid of a deformed revolution than an unsuccessful one'.³⁵⁷

The examination of the revolutionary spirit, and its consequences in France and America, in *On Revolution* is important.³⁵⁸ This is because it shows us modern humanity acting and making, initiating a genuinely new start and trying to build a structure that would sustain the gains that the original revolutionary actions had made possible:

the revolutionary spirit of the last centuries, that is the eagerness to liberate and to build a new house where freedom can dwell, is unprecedented and unequalled in all prior history³⁵⁹

On Revolution throws up the question of authority for action and judgment in a context in which it is authority itself that is being challenged.³⁶⁰ The revolutionaries themselves, Arendt stresses (and this is a point made by such diverse critics as Karl Marx and Gilles Deleuze),³⁶¹ were in many ways old fashioned: the 'strange pathos of novelty' arose from the actions of people who thought that they were restoring ancient right or imitating (Roman) republican Virtue. Thought lagged behind action. The classical models gave them courage, but it was the act of

scepticism about, for instance, the foundation of Israel as a nation state for Jews and not Palestinians ('Arabs'), without drawing the, to me, obvious conclusion that, here as elsewhere, *volksisch* solutions to borders and states create more problems than they solve. See Canovan, 1992 pp. 246-7.

³⁵⁷ *Men in Dark Times*, p.53.

³⁵⁸ See Hansen, 1993 chapter 5 ('Revolution') for an excellent discussion of the place of revolution in Arendt's thought and the dilemmas that it poses.

³⁵⁹ *On Revolution*, p. 35

³⁶⁰ See Bernstein, pp. 126-7 in Berkowitz 2010 for the way in which revolution, like civil disobedience, both challenges and seeks to found authority.

³⁶¹ In his *Difference and Repetition*, *passim*.

beginning that saved them, at least in the case of the American experience. Of course the fate of the two revolutions was very different, and as we have remarked it is easy to read *On Revolution* as simply the account of how one revolution failed and another succeeded. But there is more to it than that. True, Arendt has some critical things to say about the way in which the French revolutionaries 'resolved' the problem of authority, but the problem seemed the same to the reflective people in both continents. In Rousseau's words:

The great problem in politics, which I compare to the problem of squaring the circle in geometry ...[is]: How to find a form of government that puts the law above man.³⁶²

Those who would act together to found a new constitution are without the authority to do what they have actually accomplished.³⁶³ It seemed to require that the lawmakers have god-like powers; hence the perceived need for the cult of the 'Supreme Being' or 'Immortal Legislator' (Robespierre's 'continuous appeal to justice'), that would transcend both the people (supposedly the pre-political source of all power and law) and their leaders.³⁶⁴ The American revolutionaries felt the same lack, hence Jefferson's appeal to 'the laws of nature and nature's God.' The revolutionaries misunderstood this 'need for authorisation to be as old as history, but they were mistaken: the ancient world had never seen law as proceeding directly from the Deity, but as the preserving bonds and relationships (*lex*) between people. However, the pressure of the sheer and frightening novelty of their own actions invoked a kind of vertigo in the revolutionaries and so they turned to their Hebrew and Christian precedents for authority, whether as Deity, Natural Law (with 'nature's God' behind it) or

³⁶² Cited in *On Revolution*, p. 183.

³⁶³ On this and related issues of law and foundation see Schmitt, 1976 and 1988, Benjamin, 1986 and Agamben, 1978. A mass of related issues are considered in these texts, but the issue most relevant to Arendt is the question of the legitimacy of the act of founding.

³⁶⁴ For a critical discussion of Arendt's conception of founding in politics, and the relation between what he calls 'extraordinary politics to the 'normal' see Kalyvas, 2008, pp.187-291.

divinely inspired Reason. It was this 'divinely informed reason' that could warrant Jefferson's claim that 'all men are created equal' could be held to be 'self evident', when it was no such thing.

It was not the trappings of tradition that saved the revolution in the new world from going the way of the old, but the historical luck that separated *de facto* power from law. Theoretically, there was 'no avoiding the problem of the absolute' but in practice

what saved the American Revolution... was neither 'nature's god' nor self-evident truth, but the act of foundation itself³⁶⁵

This was an act that would not occur *ex nihilo*, thanks to the gestation of community and federation that was the colonial period. The point was to ensure that the 'revolutionary' act and the 'conservative' care, which would shield this new beginning through the centuries, were interconnected.³⁶⁶ This recalls Arendt's discussion of action and preservation in *The Human Condition*. In that text the *polis* had been described as 'organised remembrance', the effect of a *poiesis* that saves *praxis* from oblivion. And both resemble judgment itself, which is essentially *retrospective*. I want to argue that, judgment is 'the other side of action' as well as thought turned to the world of appearances.³⁶⁷ It is between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, but wholly in neither; partaking of *praxis* and *poiesis*, but distinct from both. And more: it is a saving power against the nihilism of *animal laborans*, the consumer society. What it is not, however, is a 'result' of cognition: it cannot be dependent on 'information' or knowledge. Kant's revolutionary contemporaries may have wanted to locate a source of authority for judgment in the Law emanating from a Beyond (e.g. the 'Immortal Legislator'), but

³⁶⁵ *On Revolution*, p. 196. On the importance of this thought see JM Bernstein's essay 'Promising and Civil Disobedience' pp. 155-127 in Berkowitz et. al., 2010.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 202.

³⁶⁷ As Arendt claims in 'Understanding and Politics' – although there she calls it 'understanding'.

the authority for a democratic polity could really only be located among the actors themselves. And only those actors in their 'house of freedom' could sustain it.

The final chapter of *On Revolution* has some fairly bleak things to say about the legacy of the American Revolution, in particular, and the problems of maintaining a political realm in general. Much of her account corresponds with the account of the nature of modernity discussed in 'Understanding and Politics' and *The Human Condition* (the loss of common sense, chaotic chatter of the social world, loss of the space of political action). The problem specifically discussed in the final chapter can be distilled in terms of the question: once a revolution, as act of freedom, has created a new condition, what space can be left for the new, for revolutionary, creative acts? Must the act of the free be followed by the sleep of the unfree?³⁶⁸ Arendt writes:

Should freedom in its most exalted sense as freedom to act be the price to be paid for foundation? This perplexity, namely, that the principle of public freedom and public happiness without which no revolution would ever have come to pass should remain the privilege of the generation of the founders has haunted all revolutionary thinking ever since.³⁶⁹

The American Revolution had given a freedom, but not the space in which that freedom could be exercised. Jefferson's 'public happiness' referred to the active involvement of the citizens in the political arena, not the interpretation of happiness that sees it entirely as the private pursuit of personal interest (so-called 'negative freedom'). But it was the latter that had triumphed in the hegemony of the labour/consumption society.

The work of the revolution fell into desuetude. The American republic failed to fulfill the role of the *polis* as 'organised remembrance.' This meant

³⁶⁸ See Kalyvas, 2008 esp. pp. 254-291 for a consideration of the tension in Arendt between the free and extraordinary moment in democratic founding, and the 'normal politics' of law and constitutionalism.

³⁶⁹ *On Revolution*, p. 231-2.

that it had failed to think through the meaning of its own experience. This failure was a contribution to, and symptom of, a fundamental retreat from political action and thought by the bulk of the population, who thereby cease to be citizens and start becoming part of a mass society:

Experiences and even the stories that grow out of what men do and endure, of happenings and events, sink back into the futility inherent in the living word and the living deed unless they are talked about over and over again. What saves the affairs of mortal men from their inherent futility is nothing but this incessant talk about them, which in its turn remains futile unless certain concepts, certain guideposts for future remembrance, and even for sheer reference, arise out of it.³⁷⁰

This loss was accompanied, as we have seen, by the loss of common sense: it was as if 'the invasion of the public realm by society'³⁷¹ and the concomitant transformation of political principle into social values, the eclipse of the space of action and speech by competing private interests, threatened the use of Kant's 'common human understanding'. Common sense in its primary meaning for Arendt means the existence of a shared world that people can feel at home in, which allows the mind to perform 'its foremost task, the comprehensive understanding of reality and the coming to terms with it.'³⁷² 'Reality' is what we possess: it must not become individual caprice or the plaything of powerful interests, for if it does we lose our grip on a real world because we cannot 'see' our way. 'Dark Times' are the result. The triumph of the social has meant the pulverisation of the world that we both make and are confronted by. Arendt's profoundly phenomenological understanding of the political as the lucent *topos* of appearance is combined with her Kantian grasp on the importance of

³⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 220.

³⁷¹ Ibid. p. 221.

³⁷² Ibid. p. 220.

judgment as discrimination at both the level of 'ordinary human understanding' and 'taste'. Both have fragility and a kind of potential for recrudescence or rebirth: natality. If hope persists it must be in the face of the threat posed by 'private interest'.

Arendt comments in *On Revolution* that the 'corruption and perversion' of the public domain by private interest follows a corresponding obliteration of the public/private distinction. The threat to the republic now comes, not from the misuse of public power against private individuals but from 'the people' themselves. In an age of 'rapid and constant economic growth, that is, of a constantly increasing expansion of the private realm...the conditions of the modern age' in which 'all the power [has] been given to the people in their private capacity, [with] no space established for them in their capacity of being citizens' they will hardly follow Jefferson's injunction to 'Love your neighbour as yourself, and your country more than yourself' if the country is not 'a living presence in the midst of its citizens'.³⁷³

The issue remains one of the power that humans have when they act with others (Arendt is always careful to distinguish between power as an effect of human plurality from mere force or violence) and the connection this power has with freedom and happiness:

no one could be called happy without his share in public happiness, ...no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom, and that no one could be called either happy or free without participating,

³⁷³ The quotations are from *On Revolution*, pp. 252-3. See Benhabib, 1996 p 145 on the light this sheds on Arendt's (in)famous separation of the 'political' from the 'social'; see also the final chapter of the present work.

and having a share, in public power.³⁷⁴

Arendt's reflections on the problem of political representation, elites and council systems revolve around her conviction that freedom is always exercised under a spatial limitation, and that

If we equate these spaces of freedom - which...we could also call spaces of appearances - with the political realm itself, we shall be inclined to think of them as islands in a sea or oases in a desert.³⁷⁵

The question for Arendt is how to create spaces that can be entered by a self selecting elite: those few prepared to rise above their condition as private individuals and exercise judgment in the space of appearances, the space of public happiness and freedom which is the *sensus communis*. It is here that the reflections of the decline of action in *The Human Condition* and the phenomenon of world alienation come together with the question of political judgment in the conditions of modernity. The thing

that enabled ordinary men, young and old, to bear life's burden was the polis, the space of men's free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendour³⁷⁶

Those who join this elite take responsibility to care for the world.³⁷⁷ Their actions, whatever their uncertain effects, amount to a reconciliation with what is and must be, and the authority for their actions and judgments must be found in

³⁷⁴ *On Revolution*, p. 255.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 275.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 281.

³⁷⁷ Care: from the Latin *colere*, here meaning a kind of political cultivation.

the ties (*lex*) that connect them as the One (*sensus communis*) and the Many (plurality of judges). Clearly, however, this notion of an elite appears as a repetition of the distinction between competent judges (who have Taste) and the others (who do not).

Arendt's phenomenology of action and politics belongs to the post-Kantian schism of Thought and Being, the problem of reconciliation. It is an attempt to recall us not only to the things as they appear, but also to our 'place' in which, as plural beings, we can make a world that could become our home. As we have seen, the authority of the Supersensible offers a false hope of reconciliation between what is and what appears by placing phenomena under (Divine?) Law, while all psychologising and 'naturalising' interpretations of the human condition reduce the actor/judge to the unfreedom of the empirical. Arendt needed to avoid both. For her, meaning was inseparable from speech and action, and so our hope for reconciliation with the world must be directed to what appears to us in our plural, political condition.

The problem of the political versus social/economic schism in Arendt is a real one. It is exhibited in the parts devoted to the American colonists in *On Revolution* in particular through a remarkable absence – the lack of any extended discussion of slavery. Black slavery appears briefly in the text, and Arendt characterises this 'primordial crime' as part of a tradition prevalent on both sides of the Atlantic, rather than the 'dominance of self interest.'³⁷⁸ But as Domenico Losurdo argues, *pace* Arendt, the class interests of the plantation owners certainly 'played an important role, which did not escape contemporary observers'. Arendt here effectively joins the colonists in their repression of the

³⁷⁸ *On Revolution* p. 71.

‘macroscopic fact of slavery by means of their ingenious euphemisms.’³⁷⁹

Notwithstanding this significant lacuna in Arendt’s discussion, if we attend to what she means by ‘action’, ‘judgment’ and ‘political’ we shall surely see that she is concerned to promote, not some conservative enclosure for the *optimates* but rather the possibility of human freedom itself against the inhuman forces in modernity that would obliterate it. The problem here is her selective discussion of those inhuman forces that came to form the modernity we now inhabit.

Arendt, I have claimed, is justified in maintaining freedom of judgment in the face of the claims of knowledge. This does not mean that we should be ill-informed when we judge, but rather that just as a work of art somehow transcends its medium (the novel is more than words, the painting more than the brute facts of pigment and canvas) so judgment occurs in the space where the human subject shines out as who she is, as a unique one among others in a moment of intersubjective appearance. This cannot be reduced to the formulae of an ideally transparent communication or the ‘community of affect’ we get in times of heightened emotion.³⁸⁰ Judgment, like speech, is meaningful in a way that goes beyond truth and falsity. Judging reveals, or recalls us to, the world constituted as meaningful by intersubjectivity. It shows the subjects (the judges) to the subjects.³⁸¹ Meaning, like art, transforms by showing us who we are and what we must become. It shines forth, it appears. It is irreducible

³⁷⁹ See Losurdo, 2011, p 30. We shall return to the repressed question of slavery in the formation of a political modernity in the next chapter.

³⁸⁰ e.g., The death of Princess Diana in the UK or the trauma of 9/11 in the USA. Allen considers the idea that just as judgment and action by the free citizen is a kind of appearance, so exclusion could be seen as a disappearance or invisibility. See Allen, D ‘Invisible Citizens: Political Exclusion and Domination in Arendt and Ellison’ in Williams & Macedo 2005.

³⁸¹ See Lara, 2007, Chapter 4, passim for an account of how Arendt might be doing just this kind of thing in her work. And see also Curtis, 1999 pp. 13-22 on this issue: he reads Arendt’s work through the lenses of *The Life of the Mind* as an essentially phenomenological political project concerned with our sense of the reality of a plural world.

to truth in a narrow sense, in the way that the meaning of a poem is different to information about its author, or line length, but like them it could not exist if there were no 'matter', nothing to judge. The 'content' of judgment is knowledge, but the shape, the 'form' is imparted by the leap of a revolutionary imagination, which is underdetermined by 'the facts'. The 'meaning of meaning' is uncapturable in language, but it can be made visible by the artist, the actor, and the judge. And this is what a revolutionary with 'moral taste' like Rosa Luxemburg does. It is also what anyone who thinks for herself is doing, who judges because she has *elected* to think for herself even if it means thinking and acting against 'what everyone else is doing'.

Chapter 4

Judgment, *Amor Mundi* and The Lost Promise of the Enlightenment

In this chapter I will connect some important themes in Arendt to the larger question of her political stance. Arendt's commitment to what she called *amor mundi*—love of the world – is, I argue, profoundly linked to her emphasis on judgment as the manner in which individuals may disclose who they are and bring the genuinely unprecedented into being. This commitment on her part to the possibility of a free people making a future for themselves both places her in the tradition that we call 'the enlightenment', but also positions her as a radical critic of the powerful forces that came to transform and, I argue, pervert the promise of the 'Age of Revolutions'. But the critique she commences in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and continues through subsequent texts needs to be supplemented, I argue, by an analytical narrative that includes the development of techniques of enslavement and exploitation that are also a part of the genesis of modernity.

Amor Mundi

We saw that at the end of 'Understanding and Politics,' Arendt invoked the imagination as a kind of saving power, connected with the capacity to be reconciled with the world and to make new beginnings. She seems to be about to name it as judgment, but does not. In fact she goes on to give an account of imagination as our modern term

for Solomon's gift of 'an understanding heart':

Imagination enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge the abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair....Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass that we have. We are contemporaries only as far as our understanding reaches.³⁸²

This inner compass seems close to the 'enlarged understanding' of *The Critique of Judgment*.³⁸³ And we can place it alongside another eighteenth Century advocate of the imagination: Adam Smith. In his book, *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith argues that the 'judicious spectator' can cultivate his imagination such that he can put himself in the place of another, extending his sympathies to feel in a way that approaches the other:

..the spectator must...endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his situation is founded³⁸⁴.

Not that we succeed entirely: 'the emotions of the spectator will still be very apt to fall short of the violence of what is felt by the sufferer.'

Arendt, like Kant, has a different conception of the imagination to Smith. The

³⁸² Ibid. p.323

³⁸³ It also strongly recalls Kant's *What is Orientation in Thinking?*

³⁸⁴ Smith, I.i 4.7. See also Kateb, *Fiction as Poison* in Berkowitz et. al. 2010, p. 39 –Kateb claims that the inability to think and thus image others as different to ourselves, as *noumena* and not mere phenomena –is the failure Arendt wants to condemn 'perhaps as much as anything'.

essence of critical thinking does not consist in an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others' (Smith's word is 'sympathy', and the two words aren't synonymous, but here they seem to stand for the same thing).³⁸⁵ The practice of enlarged thinking is the use the imagination to inhabit different subject positions, and not soak up their affects but to purge oneself of the partiality that goes with one's own necessarily narrow perspective. Arendt and Kant are here more 'political' than Smith in his attempt to feel with the other. The genuinely enlarged mentality does not submerge us in a warm bath of sentiment or suggest a 'community of affect'.³⁸⁶ The latter is only a simulacrum of imaginative engagement; part of the essentially spectatorial nature of our 'post political,' mediatised, networked virtual space. It replaces the thinking political subject with the sentimental member of the networked mass. In such a case the imagination is under the direction of the social imaginary, as orchestrated by the media. This is why the feeling Smith describes can properly be called *empathy*, as feeling *with* the other is what he describes. I'd argue that it is *sympathy* that is the morally and politically relevant term. One directs one's imagination away from those one is already inclined to feel for, towards others for whom one does *not* feel any 'natural' affinity.³⁸⁷

For Kant 'no moral principle is based...on any feeling whatsoever.'³⁸⁸ The Kant-Arendt approach has a kind of impersonal horizontality, in contrast with the Smithian plunge downwards into the other's feelings. And this distinction seems to parallel the public/private, political/social binaries in Arendt. Of course there is 'feeling' in *The Critique of Judgment*, but one detects a certain discomfort with the feeling that is implicated

³⁸⁵ Arendt, 1982 p. 43. But if empathy is conceived as *sharing the feeling* of another while sympathy is *responding to the situation* of another then actually Smith is advocating the former and Arendt the latter.

³⁸⁶ I agree with Villa on this point against writers like Lisa Disch. See Villa 1999, p.238 note 62, and Disch, 1994.

³⁸⁷ See Allen for a sympathetic reading of Arendt's conception of solidarity with others and the way it relates to feminist theory: 'Solidarity after Identity Politics: Hannah Arendt and the Power of Feminist Theory' In Allen 2008 pp. 407- 428. See also Jodi Dean's *Blog Theory* for the way in which being online can be a way, not of being genuinely political or oppositional, but of being *captured* in the net of what she calls 'communicative capitalism'. Dean, 2010.

³⁸⁸ Kant: *The Metaphysics of Morals: Doctrine of Virtue*, preface p. 142.

in imagining. Kant and Arendt seem ambivalent about the place of the body, and of the non-rational or irrational. Even Smith wants to limit the variety of morally edifying feelings. Love, for instance, has an exclusivity and a mystery that cannot easily be located in the network of public justifications and reasons.³⁸⁹ It cannot be *seen*. What is true for the philosopher of compassion goes doubly for the philosopher working in the Kantian tradition. Arendt specifically excludes love from the public and political world in *The Human Condition*.³⁹⁰ For Arendt, Machiavelli was right: love in its erotic and Christianised forms can only pervert the public order.³⁹¹

Yet love is important to Arendt's work, and in a way that is related to judgment. Love appears in *Willing*, where she discusses St Augustine. There it is described as the souls gravity³⁹². Augustine, Will

...is not understood as separate faculty but in its function within the mind as a whole, where all single faculties -memory, intellect and will -are 'mutually referred to each other' - finds its redemption by being transformed into Love....there is no greater assertion of somebody or something than to love it, that is to say: I will that you be -*Amo: volo ut sis*.³⁹³

For Arendt, love is a way to come to terms with things, a reconciliation with what is, the world. In the closing pages of the 'Willing' part of *The Life of the Mind*, she connects it with natality, the appearance of new individuals in time. Here love is a practice, a relation to others and not just a feeling. Nor is it the assertion of fact. Reflective Judgment is central to it, as we discriminate, choosing this over that, in political as in aesthetic responses, where we may say 'I prefer before heaven to go astray with Plato

³⁸⁹ See Nussbaum, 1991 on this issue.

³⁹⁰ See for instance pp. 51-2 where it is described as 'inherently worldless' and p 242 where the revelatory force of love is seen as closing the gap between individuals, showing the private self: the who, not the what, of the lover.

³⁹¹ See Villa 1999 pp. 124-154 on the Arendtian avoidance of communitarian 'warmth', with its temptations to indulge in narcissistic projection of the 'true self' in public affairs.

³⁹² Arendt 1978, p. 104

³⁹³ Ibid. p. 104

rather than hold true views with his opponents.³⁹⁴ As Nietzsche remarks *there is a necessary injustice in every for and against*.³⁹⁵ But this necessary injustice, which exceeds the rule or the fact, is political and thus accountable to others, as the judge must judge with or against the others who are present; he cannot abolish them. We are considering *doxa* here, and not *logos*; judgment strives to be objective but not impartial as it is *political*.³⁹⁶

In this way it opposes nihilism. For judgment says yes to a world of others. Judgment, narrative, the complex play of legislation and production, reconfirms the world as meaningful, part of an *amor mundi* in an affirmation of the plurality and difference with others.³⁹⁷ The difficult work for a radical philosophy would be to relate the private unworldliness of love, with its potential for exclusion and a singular, destructive rage against difference, to the public realm of visibility and action. The imagination might be the mediator here, at home with both because it sets up no permanent home in either.³⁹⁸ The problem remains, however, of seeing a way in which *amor mundi* can be renewed in the face of the forces unleashed by Enlightenment and Revolution. Those forces have proved quite inimical to the institutions that would tend to the preservation of a secure *topos* for judgment.

³⁹⁴ This is Arendt citing Cicero in *Between Past and Future* pp. 224-5. See also S Lavi, 'Crimes of Action, Crimes of Thought' on this point, p.234 in Berkowitz et. al., 2010

³⁹⁵ *Human, All Too Human*, Preface.

³⁹⁶ Thus reflective judgment has an essentially agonistic quality that it shares with action. Seyla Benhabib on the other hand emphasises Arendt's view of reflective judgment as a way of attaining the 'enlarged mentality' necessary for intersubjective agreement in the public realm, over 'Habermasianising' Arendt, in the process. (Benhabib thus stands at the opposite pole to Villa, whose emphasis is on the agonistic and theatrical qualities in Arendt). I want to suggest that reflective judgment, freed from the dead end of 'taste' allows a productive and creative dissensus in the public realm. See Benhabib, 1996 pp. 188-191.

³⁹⁷ For an alternative, 'Habermasian', account of judgment see Wellmer: 'Hannah Arendt on Judgment: the Unwritten doctrine of Reason' in May and Kohn, 1996 pp. 33-53, also Martin Jay in Calhoun and McGowan, 1997 pp. 338-349. Jay seems to me to be unfair in his appraisal of Arendt's contribution. He seems to argue for an infusion of 'Habermasian norms' in order to prevent her from failing the test of achieving some kind of moral benchmark. At one point Jay seems to be applying a crude fact/value gap to Arendt; at another he seems to miss the political (not primarily ethical) import of her work.

³⁹⁸ For an account that emphasises the way in which Arendt's phenomenological politics allows us to have a sense of the real see Curtis, 1999 *passim*.

The Lost Promise of the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment experienced a kind of vertigo of freedom when it sloughed off tutelage. It replaced this dizzying freedom with other masters: race, imperialism, the Great Leader and now the Market. The public space, in which the citizen might have revealed who he was to his fellows, is squeezed less spectacularly but just as effectively as it was under totalitarianism. In this way modernity has exchanged the law of tradition for the ‘unauthorised’ law of commodification, which colonises the imagination with images and desires of its own. No one is responsible for this Law, just as no one was responsible for Nature or History and like them it is a form of nihilism as it is essentially a meaningless, inhuman force. The project of human freedom would be the struggle against the forces that bind judgment to the repetitiveness of the false new of capitalism, what Sheldon Wolin calls ‘inverted totalitarianism’.³⁹⁹

Hannah Arendt’s work famously celebrates natality, the possibility of something new being brought to light by human action and speech. But she was also aware of the fragility of what we could call the ‘political ecology’ of the West: the constitutions, liberties laws, practices and institutions that form the fabric of western liberal democracies. Arendt’s contribution partly lies in her appreciation of the way in which the culture itself has incubated the agents of its own destruction. We saw that in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she produced an analytical narrative presenting the pathological tendencies in bourgeois society as a historical phenomenon. While its outlook is mainly Eurocentric, its discussion of how imperialism returned to the metropolitan centres and set an agenda for the twentieth century anticipates more recent studies of colonialism and racism. Arendt’s concern about the way in which the enlightenment promise of

³⁹⁹ See Wolin, 2008, *passim*. For Wolin it is the merging of corporate and state power, allied to a ‘managed democracy’ that threatens an ‘inverted totalitarianism’. Here the nightmare of a society which has no reference to the common good, the *res publica*, and only consumers, rather than citizens, owes a lot to Arendt and confirms the continued relevance of her work. Arendt is a *radical* critic of modernity precisely because she does not limit her sense of the political to a critique of Stalinism. She is anything but a defender of liberal -capitalist ‘values’.

autonomy had gone awry, when linked to her other great study of political change (*On Revolution*), shows an enlightenment with ideals that were compromised from the start — by racism, exploitation and capitalism. When we look at Arendt's account of the way this happened, alongside her interest in revolution and natality, she begins to look far more radical than the Arendt we are usually asked to consider.⁴⁰⁰ I shall conclude this chapter by sketching out how judgment might be located in the context of recent history, one in which a certain conception of political modernity has exhausted itself. As we shall see, *pace* Arendt, it is not really possible to exclude the 'economic' from any satisfactory account written in an Arendtian spirit of analytical narrative. And in considering how we got into our current situation and what Arendt has to tell us about how to get out of it, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that liberalism is part of the problem, not the solution.

For our purposes, 'Modern' will be taken to refer to the period since the revolutions of the late eighteenth century; the time of the 'Declaration of the Rights of Man', and of Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* Radical, conservative and liberal currents of political philosophy alike confronted the idea of 'Revolution' and of 'the People'. The radical current wanted to push the ideals of the enlightenment in a revolutionary egalitarian-collectivist direction; conservatives wanted to either erase it or limit its noxious effects; and liberals wanted to consolidate states with constitutional protections for individuals and free trade. Each of these currents of thought has a characteristic way of imagining the people, that mass that generally takes little or no part in the running of the state and its institutors. I shall mainly focus on radical and liberal problems with 'the people': empowering the people, after all, was supposed to be part of their project. We shall see that there was ambivalence about what this meant from the start.

⁴⁰⁰ For a (brief) attempt to see Arendt as an innovative radical thinker see Reinhardt, M. *The Art of Being Free: taking liberties with Tocqueville, Marx and Arendt*, 1997, chapter 5 *passim*.

‘Western’ democracies that see themselves as the inheritors of the ‘Age of Revolution’ appear to be at some great distance from the ‘revolutionary’ ideals of liberty, equality and solidarity. Whatever one’s views about the political class that provides the democratic system with its leaders, the situation is not one in which a citizenry usually takes an active part in government. There are leaders and led: the intellectuals, politicians and bureaucrats who think and act ‘politically’ and a populace — a citizenry — who are mainly passive. Does this matter? One can take the view that no other way of doing politics is possible or desirable as radical democracy takes up too many of peoples’ evenings, to paraphrase Benjamin Constant. So politicians should be a select group who allocate resources and run the machine of state while the rest of us get on with our private lives. I want to challenge this view. The choice isn’t between a strenuous state of political hyperactivity or a division of labour between public servants and private citizens. It is about whether we can hang on to a conception of the political that allows something vital in human life to live, or whether this will be extinguished.⁴⁰¹ And this question of leader and led is another form of the problem of political inclusion/exclusion implicit in Kant’s notion of a *sensus communis* and expressed in Arendt’s remarks in *On Revolution* about self-selecting elites. Arendt’s work casts a clear light on this issue and what we might have to do about it, even if she cannot, in the end, resolve it herself. But to grasp what she has to say we need to reflect on how we came to be where we are now.

The states that generally regard themselves as the inheritors of the Age of Revolution (let us say about 1776-1848) were marked and formed by similar events and developments, although not all to the same extent: the two world wars, mass genocide, industrial revolution, wars of national liberation, etc. But although this period was

⁴⁰¹ See d’Entreves who argues that she is defending opinion as political deliberation against Plato and Hobbes. d’Entreves, pp. 257-8 in Villa, 2000.

marked by conflict between variants of ‘enlightenment’ political philosophy (radicalism in its socialist and Marxist forms), and the anti-enlightenment ideologies (fascism, some variants of conservatism and nationalism), one of our three strands of political philosophy appeared as the clear winner: *liberalism*, with its heterogeneous set of ideas—democracy, legal-political equality, rights, tolerance, individualism and capitalism. By some measures this has been a very successful political and economic model, particularly in the post 1945 period and even more so since 1989.⁴⁰² There has been an increase in living standards for large parts of the developed world and a weakening and possibly finally the extinction of alternatives (especially ‘actually existing socialism’). Along with this, though, there has been the development of a managerial political elite, the development of politics along the lines of spectator sports and the effective displacement of political decisions away from not only the citizenry, but also their elected representatives, as liberalism’s engine, capitalism, went truly global. This is the context of our political modernity. But what is ‘politics’?

Perhaps the way to approach this question is to remember Nietzsche’s point to the effect that ‘only that which has no history can be defined’.⁴⁰³ The Platonic/Socratic method of getting at the truth of a thing through a definition is rejected because it implies that all things have stable essences, which a definition can capture. ‘Triangle’ *can* be defined because triangles were the same for the 5th century BCE as they are for us — they have no history. But it’s not a helpful approach for a concept like ‘justice’, ‘state’ — or politics. Politics has undergone considerable change and development in meaning

⁴⁰² This ‘success’, of course, included the pursuit of profitability through an assault on labour unions and the suppression of real wages, the ‘financialisation’ of the economy with its vast increase in debt fuelled demand, a big increase in social inequality and an increasingly unstable, globalised, economic system, not to mention serious and unpredictable climate change. See Harvey, 2007, *passim*.

⁴⁰³ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 2:13. Presumably, however, it must be possible to trace an historical ‘something’ as it changes through history, or a term like ‘politics’ would have no purchase at all outside the specific uses it has in a single epoch. A definition may not be stable, but not be completely arbitrary either; we can trace its metamorphoses through time.

since fifth century BCE. So it makes more sense to ask what politics means for people in a particular time and place and how it has changed up to or since that time, rather than look for a single stable meaning available to all times and all peoples. If this is right then we must accept that for the political philosopher the study of history is indispensable.

I'm going to focus exclusively on modern understandings of politics, since about 1789: 'political modernity' and its enlightenment roots. The first task is to give a brief idea of what, according to one of its leading thinkers, enlightenment could be, before looking at some of the problems that obscured and thwarted that vision. In a very real sense the promise of freedom was deeply compromised from the very start, and by the very thing that liberal proponents of autonomy would champion.

Freedom and Enslavement

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt comments that

The Declaration of the Rights of Man at the end of the eighteenth Century was a turning point in history. It meant nothing more nor less than that from then on Man, and not God's command or the customs of history, should be the source of Law. Independent of the privileges which history had bestowed upon certain nations, the declaration indicated man's emancipation from all tutelage and announced he had now come of age ⁴⁰⁴

In 1786 Kant answered the question 'What is Enlightenment?' in similar terms. It was to be the end of tutelage, casting aside the would-be guides (and gaolers) of the priest and King, in order to achieve maturity, which Kant takes to be *thinking for oneself*. He adds that this must involve the free use of public reason, the uncensored exchange of

⁴⁰⁴ *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 290-1. For a book length study of Arendt on the 'right to have rights' see P Birmingham, 2006.

opinion between citizens *qua* citizens – as distinct from the use of the private reason of the specialist, bureaucrat, etc. Kant’s message then, and that of the Declaration, is anti-paternalist. It invokes the idea of a mature citizenry. Kant himself was no radical democrat, but his account does capture a core meaning of the politics of the enlightenment: free citizens, deliberating together without the miasma of superstition, taboo or state censor.

We should notice that this is a kind of promise rather than an accomplished fact, a statement about what can be, what is even now coming to be.⁴⁰⁵ And here we have to pay attention to the historical moment of these declarations. Arendt points out in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the declaration coincided with an uncertainty about the place of people as the feudal structure ceased to provide a framework of security and meaning. The Declaration might be ‘universal’ in intent, but it was the emergent nation-state that would have to be the guarantor of those rights. The universal was to be expressed through the concrete particulars of the new states. So the Declaration of the Rights of Man stands in ambiguous position to the newly Republican French State: the rights apply universally, presumably, but it will be a particular state that will defend them. The immediate problem becomes that of identifying those who are bearers of rights and freedoms and those who are not.⁴⁰⁶

This was not a simple matter of excluding foreigners. The second half of the Eighteenth Century was the period in which the slave trade and the plantation system became a large part of the wealth-creating economy for those same states that regarded themselves as being in the forefront of liberty. One only has to contemplate the

⁴⁰⁵ It can also be understood as a *permanent* possibility of individual emancipation.

⁴⁰⁶ This is a further difficulty, and not without irony: As Serena Parekh writes, the notion of human rights ‘became politically significant precisely at the moment when it was no longer possible to justify them.’ See S Parekh, 2008 p. 1. Modernity means, among other things, the loss of transcendent or absolute justification. See also the final chapter of the present work.

importance of a phenomenon like this to see that Arendt's account needs to be supplemented and corrected by one that attends to social and economic factors. The enlightenment vision may have been flawed at the start in its distinction between the cultivated and uncultivated, but it was the economically motivated enslavement and repression of masses of people that first undid the promise of universal freedom. The existence of huge slave populations in the colonial possessions of the European states, and in the plantations of the southern states of the new USA, were a clear anomaly, but it was one that was allowed to persist. In fact, as several historians have recently pointed out, the idea that slavery should be ruled out as a way of disciplining the (European, white) labouring poor was a comparatively recent one.⁴⁰⁷ In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the issue was one of ensuring labour discipline as the feudal structures declined. Hobbes, Locke, Pufendorf and Hutcheson all endorsed versions of domestic slavery for idlers, paupers, landless and masterless men, of whom there were a great many, given the spread of the enclosure movement. From the mid century this ceased to be widely advocated 'as the slave populations in the colonies mushroomed and production boomed.'⁴⁰⁸ Awareness of the cruelty of the slave system certainly grew in this period, but so did a fascination on the part of industrialists in Europe with the methods of surveillance and control that the slave system had developed.⁴⁰⁹

A number of subsequent developments should be noted. When the movement to abolish first the slave trade, then slavery itself gathered pace, so did the rhetoric of freedom that developed in the 'white' metropolitan centres, along with a clearly racist ideology of the unfitness of the Negro to rule himself. And when slavery itself was actually done away with, the anxiety of the abolitionists was focused on the issue of

⁴⁰⁷ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823*; Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*.

⁴⁰⁸ Buck-Morss, p. 89.

⁴⁰⁹ Davis, p. 458.

labour discipline: would the ex-slave turn up for work? Having no alternative way to feed his family, turn up for work he did. The lesson was not lost on liberals in Britain:

As reformers grappled with the problems of crime, pauperism and labour discipline, they seemed to be unconsciously haunted by the image of the slave plantation...Slave-holders and industrialists shared a growing interest not only in surveillance and control but in modifying the character and habits of their workers.⁴¹⁰

The anti-slavery figureheads like Wilberforce and Hutcheson were often the very men who pressed for the most severe treatment of working people at home; the interest of a 'progressive' figure like Bentham in methods of surveillance is well known. Thus, a quite peculiar and selective application of 'freedom' developed in Europe. Free trade meant that the legislation that had protected customs of trade and restrictive practices of workers were repealed (many, as EP Thompson has noted, in the period 1807-9 when the slave trade ended). Similarly, when slavery itself was abolished (1834) the Poor Law Amendment Act ended the old system of public welfare and brought in the workhouse – the unemployed now had the choice to starve or work for their keep in the humiliating workhouse, as Davis notes.⁴¹¹ The worker that was in a condition of perpetual dependence, could, because he accepted wages and was thus not a slave, be defined as free:

What mattered then, was not labour exploitation, but sustaining the fiction of voluntary submission to it...free property, plus free labour, plus free trade added up to the newly conceived modern criterion of liberty.⁴¹²

That strain in the enlightenment in which we can see the first signs of a

⁴¹⁰ Davis, p. 458.

⁴¹¹ Ibid. p. 357.

⁴¹² Buck-Morss, p. 100.

recognisably 'liberal' style of thought, with its emphasis on individual freedom and political (not economic) equality had, from the start, at least a deep ambivalence towards the mass of people. As classical liberalism gave way to the social liberalism of later decades the political parties that sought the votes of the newly enfranchised masses ceased to use the language of the plantation owner, but the conception of freedom developed in this period ('free property-free labour-free trade') persisted. Built into the structure of the post revolutionary west was the conception of political and civic freedom (up to a point) allied to dependence on the part of the mass of workers and an anxiety about how to modify the behaviour of those same workers to turn them into sober and diligent labourers and mothers (or both). As we shall see, and as Arendt notes, the most recent developments of what we must call 'bourgeois culture' have continued in this line, with one major adjustment: the manipulation of consumers, rather than workers is emphasised.

The Radical Leap

How do a people achieve maturity? To announce enlightenment as a coming-to-maturity of the people is already to inscribe a schism between the philosopher and the people. Kant makes it clear that the mass of people have a common human understanding that can be corrupted and led astray by demagogues⁴¹³. It would seem that the time of emancipation is soon, but not yet at hand. The radical alternative to waiting for this right time is the voluntarist move: a leap to full freedom and citizenship, identification with 'the people' and a demand that they achieve full freedom immediately. A characteristic language of radicals is that of the 'will' of the people, in an idiom that seem to owe a lot to Rousseau (and which finds an echo, of course, in Kant). On the eve

⁴¹³ See Chapter 2.

of revolution, Abbe Sieyes wrote that ‘Every man has an inherent right to deliberate and will for himself...’ and ‘either one wills freely or one is forced to will, there cannot be any middle position,’ outside genuine self legislation ‘there cannot be anything other than the empire of the strong over the weak and its odious consequences.’⁴¹⁴ The language adopted is of a collective or general will, and the problem is how to ensure its unity and survival:

However a nation may will, it is enough for it to will [and] for its will to be made known for all positive law to fall silent in its presence, because it is the source and supreme master of all positive law ⁴¹⁵

And Robespierre and St Just would echo this Rousseauesque style of language in the revolution itself. Kant’s response is well known. For him, violent revolution would involve a morally unacceptable commitment to secrecy, but according to the *Conflict of the Faculties* an event like the French Revolution is a signal that human progress is at least possible. Kant endorses (shares) the enthusiasm of the spectators (the well wishers across the world) without actually endorsing the actors. The spectator-judge and actor thus stand in different spheres: Kant on one side, and the revolutionaries on the other. For the former, the revolution is a sign that the future freedom may eventually be achieved; for the latter the revolution is the institution of a *new time*, one in which the General Will is expressed through the laws of the land. From the point of view of the radical/revolutionary a certain frustration with the Kantian position is understandable, as to feel enthusiasm for a revolution someone has to make it in the here and now, and for people who are enslaved and starving emancipation cannot come too soon. This applies even more to Toussaint l’Ouverture and the slave uprising in Haiti⁴¹⁶ than it does to the

⁴¹⁴ EJ Sieyes, ‘Views of the Executive means Available to the Representatives of France in 1789’ (1789) in *Sieyes’ Political Writings* Hackett 2003, tr. Schumacher, p. 10.

⁴¹⁵ Sieyes, ‘What is the Third Estate?’ (1789) in *Political Writings*.

⁴¹⁶ A revolution that won political rights for the ex-slaves, but which kept them dependent on wages for plantation

sans culottes of Paris.

The problem for the revolutionary, for the radical, is to close the gap between them and ‘the people’, ‘the masses’ etc., by the violence of the act. The revolution becomes an act of popular self-education, producing effects that will retrospectively justify the act, and which will ‘educate the educators’ (Marx). This will be as true for Lenin as it was for Babeuf or St Just. There is an idea of the popular will or the proletariat. The difficulty, of course, lies in locating this Will, interpreting it correctly, distinguishing it from *simulacra* or diversions (the will of all) and distinguishing between comradely disagreement and counterrevolutionary factionalising. If the aim is to achieve, at a leap, the emancipation of the people from their mental chains as well as their material privations the dilemma will be what to do if actually existing people do not conform to the idea of the-people-in-theory. The apparent solution, that a small group of committed revolutionaries should speak for the as yet mute people is, as Rosa Luxemburg pointed out, tempting *and* problematic, especially under conditions of revolutionary war and famine.⁴¹⁷ For Arendt, it was the sheer pressure of these forces (war, the social question) that brought down the ambitious plans of the Jacobins. ‘The fight for public freedom against overwhelming odds of private misery’ was lost.⁴¹⁸ Beyond that, it was the struggle of the Jacobins for absolute power over all other centres of debate, deliberation and discussion (the myriad associations, clubs and debating groups that had come into existence before and during the revolution) that proved disastrous:

Theoretically, this was the fight for a unified public opinion, a ‘general will’ against the public spirit, the diversity inherent in freedom of thought and speech; practically, it was the power struggle of party and

work. This excited the admiration of the abolitionists in Europe and the USA. See Buck-Morss, *passim*.

⁴¹⁷ See, for instance, her critique of this tendency in ‘Leninism or Marxism?’ (1904), and in ‘The Russian Revolution’ (1918). Collected in Luxemburg, 2006.

⁴¹⁸ *On Revolution*, p 245.

party interests against *la chose publique*, the common weal.[..] the fight of the nation-state against the first beginnings of a true republic.⁴¹⁹

The American Revolution or War of Independence did not have to confront these difficulties. The development of the colonies as *de facto* self-governing communities, and their prosperity, meant that prefigurative forms were in place before 1775. For Arendt, the ‘lost treasure of the revolution’ was the decline of Jefferson’s ideal of ‘public happiness’ through the very triumph of a liberal-bourgeois state in the USA. The pursuit of happiness, according to Arendt, was supposed to be the experience of public happiness: the extension to one’s faculties of ruling oneself — instead of King George, the active exercise of the political abilities of the people. Yet this too was lost as the pursuit of happiness took ever more privatised and material forms.

The Liberal Victory

Three political philosophies were contending for the inheritance of the age of revolution: Radical/egalitarian, Conservative and Liberal. For conservatives, after the more extreme response of de Maistre and his like (speedy eradication of the fact and the idea of the revolution; a total return to and restoration of the ancient regime), a more pragmatic ‘reaction’ remained possible. Burke stands here in an interesting position. No bone-headed follower of despotism, he had argued the case of the colonists with great eloquence. His *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) stems from a horror at many things, including the thought of *sans culottes* rampaging through the Tuileries, but also the pretensions of the ‘democratic’ revolutionary elite. He can be seen as a mere counterrevolutionary, yet the conservative tradition to which he belongs (which includes Carlyle and Ruskin) developed a critique of the liberal individualism of the new

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. p. 245. Arendt’s writing on the events of 1793-4 in France echoes Luxemburg’s words on 1917-8 in Russia.

century.⁴²⁰ Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1860), for instance, belongs to a tradition of social criticism that was to prove influential on the labour movement of the early Twentieth Century as well as the leaders of the struggle for independence in India (Gandhi translated it into Gujarati). Ruskin's book is an extended attack on liberal 'political economy' with John Stuart Mill's volumes on the subject as one of its main targets. Ruskin was certainly no socialist (he makes the point repeatedly that he does not support egalitarianism) but the force of his attack is on the way in which the ideology of 'free-property, free-trade, free-labour' dehumanised and atomised social life. The outlook is one that emphasises not equality or liberty, but fraternity, or social solidarity, a rejection of 'value free' liberal political economy as bogus and destructive.

Nevertheless, liberalism entrenched itself in power and wrote the narrative that made its dominance seem inevitable and right, a part of common sense. One can contrast liberal theory from liberal practice, but before that one notes that liberalism has a number of problems even considered as a group of ideas. In addition, there were economic and historical forces that were to ensure that liberalism would have a difficulty in fulfilling the promise of enlightenment — that of a responsible, 'mature' citizenry in the driving seat of power. That these forces were present from the start has already been seen. In effect, the development of conception of liberal freedom — that is, one restricted to political freedoms, associated with the inegalitarian principle of 'free-trade, free-property, free-labour' meant that the goal of a republic in which all the people had a role to play in government, in politics, would be subordinated to the private interests of one class. In the light of this, it is clear that an account of politics that forecloses consideration of political *economy*, as Arendt's tries to do, is bound to be incomplete.

⁴²⁰ Although a simple label like 'counterrevolutionary' may be inadequate to describe Burke, as CB Macpherson has shown, Burke's thinking is rooted in his conception of political economy and his linking of Utility and Natural Law. For Burke 'capitalism and the traditional order were the same, because capitalism needed the sanction of tradition and habit'. Macpherson, 1980 p 71. The free market would of necessity imply the subordination of the working class.

‘Liberal’ is a protean word, and no extensive investigation into it can be attempted here. Most liberals would presumably agree that at its heart is a concern for freedom of the individual, here thought of as the opportunity to choose freely (Isaiah Berlin’s ‘negative freedom’ is a good example of this sort of approach).⁴²¹ The state is supposed to respect the individual’s freedom by being neutral on the question of what would be good for him/her to choose (this would include lifestyle, beliefs, choice of occupation), while acting to ensure that the exercise of freedom by individuals and groups should not cause harm to others, which is Mill’s criterion for when the law should intervene. So law regulates intercourse between individuals and does not promote a particular view of ‘the good’, and a strict distinction is maintained between public and private, the latter including not only individuals and families but also economic activity in civil society. The state is an essentially external agency to society. The problem is that although citizens are encouraged to vote, join parties etc, there is a growing tendency for public political life to become the preserve of an elite class of politicians and bureaucrats, as Arendt was well aware.

Historically, this approach has tended to be linked to free markets, to capitalism.⁴²² This link means that liberalism must accept inequality of distribution, of wealth and property. This is not a contentious point for liberals, as free individuals will not all be economically successful, and although the state may provide a welfare safety net or assistance in overcoming ‘brute bad luck’ (in Brian Barry’s phrase) there is no expectation of an end to actual inequality. (This fact has implications for the liberal conception of freedom, and it is here that Marxists are perhaps best placed to make the point that freedom without the power to actualise one’s choices is empty.) More

⁴²¹ See the essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, *passim*, in Berlin, 1969.

⁴²² No necessary connection between free markets and liberalism is being asserted here, anymore than between markets and democracy. One only needs to consider Lee Kuan Yu’s Singapore or China today to see that capitalism can thrive in non-liberal societies.

important for our purposes, is the theory and the practice of politics under these conditions, and it is on this issue that Hannah Arendt makes some important points. For her, it is the category of the 'political' itself which comes under threat.

What is crucial for Arendt is that the powerful forces unleashed by capitalism (especially technology and the class of technical 'experts' who direct and administer it) threaten to eliminate political life itself as she conceives it. Arendt, like Marx, is much struck by the dynamic, endlessly revolutionising quality of modern capitalism, the way in which 'all that is solid melts into air' and there are passages in her work (especially in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*) which rival Marx himself on the subject of the bourgeois-liberal approach to private gain at the expense of public good. For it is the *res publica*, the public thing, that is squeezed out by the kind of society we have been discussing.⁴²³ This is important for Arendt because it is through acting and speaking together that humans realise their unique potential to bring something entirely new and unprecedented into the world, what she calls 'natality'.⁴²⁴

This may seem a surprising claim to make, given that a defining feature of modernity is the idea of openness to the new, to change itself. Yet the new promoted by capitalism is a 'false new'. This is very well analysed by Adorno in his section called 'Late Extra' in *Minima Moralia* (1951):

The cult of the new, and thus the idea of modernity, is a rebellion against the fact that there is no longer

⁴²³ The 'unnatural growth of the natural' (*The Human Condition*, p. 47) that Arendt laments is a feature of modernity – much more evident in 'turbo-capitalism' than it ever was in the sluggish economy of the USSR and it thus retains its relevance in the era of neoliberalism. Margaret Canovan suggests that this concept is 'not altogether persuasive'; I would say the opposite. See Canovan, 1992 p. 280.

⁴²⁴ Canovan correctly identifies this as a major part of Arendt's contribution to political thought. On the other hand, she neglects the vital role of role of *judgment* in the dimension of the public realm. Ibid. pp. 280-1.

anything new⁴²⁵

Capitalism generates a universe of commodities, and a cult of the new, which is a kind of rebellion against the fact that ‘there is no longer anything new,’ since ‘new’ here simply means one more thing to be consumed in the world of *animal laborans*. In this sense we are like addicts, seeking to consume the new, again and again. Like addicts, this is experienced as compulsion, not freedom, and as cyclical, not linear or progressive. No one is getting anywhere and nothing new occurs, for all the innovations in technology stimulated by the process. It is not in this essentially private realm of pleasures that there is true freedom. The role of political elites becomes one of managing and influencing the masses, here conceived as essentially irrational and incapable of autonomy. In *Public Opinion* (1922), Walter Lippmann argued that it was the essentially selfish, herd-like mass of private individuals, essentially an aggregation of potentially conflicting interests, who had to be manipulated by the elite into agreeing with what was good for them, by a process he called ‘manufacturing consent’.

Freedom

It is against this threat to human freedom that Arendt stresses our capacity to begin anew.⁴²⁶ This is the idea that people can act and speak in ways that are not bound by the past, or by inherited norms and rules. In this she was a good student of Kant: a free citizenry must act and speak for itself, and not take direction from experts, priests or technicians. For this to occur, there must be a public space of freedom, where people can show who and what they are; it is therefore vital that we preserve a public dimension because only there are we at our most human, displaying our individual uniqueness as

⁴²⁵ Adorno, 1978 (1951), section 150, p. 235.

⁴²⁶ See Bowen-Moore, 1989 for a book-length treatment of the concept of natality in Arendt. Bowen-Moore goes so far as to argue that it is her main claim to a place in the history of political theory.

part of the plurality of the human condition.⁴²⁷ What went wrong with political modernity is that our three strands of political thought lost the place, or practice, of politics. It is true that she continues a strand of thought traceable to Aristotle: a sense that politics, rather than being an external regulation of selfish individuals, is an integral part of our nature, but she goes further than that. Aristotle's *phronesis* (practical wisdom) was entirely bounded by the *sittlichkeit*, the pre-reflective norms of a given culture. Arendt, as a student of Kant emphasised *reflective judgment*: judgment that exceeds the norms and precedents of the past. In this way her thinking matches the need for a political philosophy for the free citizens of a political modernity.⁴²⁸

This capacity for the new beginning does not occur in a vacuum. It is embedded in the place and time in which people find themselves. It is the response to the conditions in which one is situated, a response that could not have been predicted *from* those conditions. To make something new is to act with risk, like an adult, because the contingencies of life mean we can never be sure where what we have started will take us. It is also to act and speak *with others*.⁴²⁹ This is not possible in the obscure pursuit of our various private ends. To allow the private pursuit of happiness to replace public engagement is to place oneself back in the hands of our equivalent of the aristocrat and the priest - the bureaucrat and the expert. Politics is important because it is the activity in which we disclose *possibility*; a public space survives only where, according to Arendt, new beginnings are perpetually added to the flow of things that have already been initiated.

⁴²⁷ On the link between thinking and such spaces of freedom see Berkowitz, 'Solitude and the Activity of Thinking' in Berkowitz et. al. 2010 pp. 237-245. See also Barash 'Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger and the Politics of Remembrance' for a defence of Arendt on natality, and for the claim that this involves her in a critique of Heidegger, in Allen, 2008 pp. 187-198.

⁴²⁸ See JM Bernstein, 'Promising and Civil Disobedience' in Berkowitz et. al. 2010 on the experience of refounding in political modernity. He also cites Wolin's claim that the political is a mode of experience, and not an institution like a state. Bernstein remarks –and this is an insight fully in line with the argument I have been pursuing here, that civil disobedience and revolution is 'dependent on the radical past it exceeds and the repressive present it repudiates', and in so doing reveals the political as 'always failing (ready to be lost again)' (p. 116).

⁴²⁹ Not that this implies knowing or displaying a 'true self' to the others: public life loses something vital when we merely project our 'character'. Arguably, what we need is acting (in the theatrical sense) in public: and this entails the use of masks. See Villa, 1999, pp. 128-154.

Arendt can sometimes seem conservative and sometimes radical because she is Janus-faced: she looks to the past, to a delicate ecology of the shared human world, that Burke and Ruskin prized; but she sounds most like radical when she grasps the centrality of our capacity to begin again, because, as she said, ‘we are all new, we are all new beginnings.’⁴³⁰

⁴³⁰ See Kampowski, 2008 *passim* for the earliest expression by Arendt of this theme in her doctoral dissertation. On the importance of ‘the new beginning’ in Arendt see A Heller, ‘Hannah Arendt on the *vita contemplativa*’ in Kaplan and Kessler, 1989 p.159.

Chapter 5

Thinking, Willing and Judging

‘As Eichmann told it, the most potent factor in the soothing of his own conscience was the simple fact that he could see no one, no one at all, who actually was against the Final Solution’.⁴³¹ Perhaps Eichmann did not look very far. Summoning the moral and physical courage to resist was far from easy and certainly sporadic, but it did occur. One example is that of the actions of the students who undertook to protest against the Reich under the name of ‘The White Rose Society’ and later ‘The White Rose Resistance’.

From the Leaflets of the White Rose Society, June 1942- January 1943:

‘Nothing is so unworthy of a civilised nation as to allow itself to be ‘governed’ without any opposition by an irresponsible clique that has yielded to basest instincts. It is certainly the case today that every honest German is ashamed of his government. Who among us has any conception of the enormous shame that we and our children will feel when eventually the veil drops from our eyes and the most horrible of crimes – crimes that eclipse all atrocities throughout history – are exposed to the full light of day?

[...]

If everyone waits for someone else to make a start, the messengers of avenging Nemesis will come steadily closer until even the last victim has been cast senselessly into the maw of the insatiable demon. Therefore every individual has to consciously accept his responsibility as a member of western and Christian civilisation in this last hour; to arm himself as best he can to work against the scourges of humanity, against fascism and every other form of the absolute state. Adopt passive resistance –resistance- wherever you are and block the functioning of this atheistic war machine before it is too late..

[...]

⁴³¹ Arendt, 1968, p. 116. See also Chapter 1 of the present work.

Here we see the most terrible crime committed against the dignity of man, a crime that has no counterpart in human history. For Jews too are human beings – no matter what position we take with respect to the Jewish question – and a crime of this dimension has been perpetrated against human beings

[...]

Why are the German people so apathetic in the face of all these abominable crimes, crimes so unworthy of the human race? Hardly anyone thinks about that

[...]

We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. *The White Rose* will not leave you in peace!

[...]

Our people stand ready to rebel against the National Socialist enslavement of Europe in an impassioned uprising of freedom and honour.⁴³²

Six leaflets were produced and five distributed by the small group of Munich University students between 1942-3 that called itself *The White Rose Society* and later *The White Rose Resistance*. It was while distributing the fifth leaflet –that Hans and Sophie Scholl were detected and arrested.⁴³³ Their trial and execution soon followed. Others involved in the resistance suffered the same fate; with a few of those more peripherally involved being sentenced to terms of imprisonment of varying harshness.

Whatever else one concludes when one reflects on the extraordinary courage and resolution these young people showed, one thing is clear, that whatever Eichmann may have said about the apparent lack of opposition to the Nazi regime, such a thing *was* possible – it did exist.⁴³⁴ Yet as even the authors of the leaflets were well aware, most people were if not ‘apathetic in the face of these abominable crimes’ then clearly unwilling to speak or act against them. We seem to be left with the fact that some

⁴³² See Dumbach and Newborn, 2006: Appendix 1: Leaflets, for the full texts.

⁴³³ For an account of Scholl and the White rose resistance to Hitler’s regime see Dumbach & Newborn, *Sophie Scholl and the White Rose* 2006. For an account of her life, see McDonough *Sophie Scholl* 2010.

⁴³⁴ It should not be imagined that the leaflets had no effect: they were distributed throughout Germany and beyond, and the Nazis published the news of the fate of the resisters. Even Adolf Eichmann might have noticed.

thought about the meaning of what was going on, and some judged and then acted. But not very many. Yet those who did act give us some grounds for hope in the capacity of humans to do other than follow the route of dumb acquiescence to tyranny and murder. As for Eichmann, he not only did not think, did not judge or act against the regime: he became an efficient part of the machinery of extermination.

Arendt On Thinking, Willing and Judging

Just as there is no ‘Arendtian’ *magnum opus*, so there is no goal or point to which all her work leads. The fact that it stopped with her death in 1975, part way through the *Life of the Mind*, proves neither that the book, nor its final part on judgment, was what it had all been leading up to, nor that this was her definitive word on the issues that concerned her. Yet there had been a development in her work: from 1961 the various strands of her thinking had attained a kind of focus on the question of judgment. The experience of the Eichmann trial had something to do with this new focus: Eichmann’s name makes a reappearance in the introduction to *The Life of the Mind*, where Arendt comments that it was her experience of attending his trial that set her thinking about mental activity, the habit of thinking and judging.⁴³⁵ That said, we cannot place *The Life of the Mind* as the ‘unfinished masterpiece’ at the terminus of her life, with the unfinished chapter on judgment as the frustrated promise of a final statement. Last words are not necessarily the most important.⁴³⁶

Arendt’s work does not move to a single major statement, still less build a system. Instead, it circles around a constellation of problems and themes. This ‘resultless’ process

⁴³⁵ One of the problems of Arendt’s development without any clear *magnum opus* has been the difficulty of assessing what her final thoughts were, and whether they are consistent with her earlier ones. See, for instance Tlaba, 1987, who concludes that there is a fundamental consistency in her thought.

⁴³⁶ Arendt’s final work cannot be understood in isolation from her entire corpus. For an example of a study that pays insufficient attention to this fact, and is thereby seriously disabled, see Deutscher, 2007, *passim*.

of thinking is no futile repetition: with each ‘turn’ Arendt enriches her understanding of those problems and themes. Evidently there will be nothing like an answer to the questions she poses, but the questions are increasingly apposite, as they are refined and complexified. By Arendt’s own criterion, this is the sign by which we know that genuine thinking is going on.⁴³⁷ Certain issues and lines of thought will seem more central to her work while others lose their centrality. The decisive shift in the period 1950-1975 is from an examination of the historical and political occultation of thinking and acting by the ‘social’ (the problem of the ascendancy of *homo laborans* in bourgeois modernity) to a foregrounding of judgment as the capacity to distinguish good from evil, and its importance to the citizen. Another way of putting it is that there was a shift from Aristotle and the *polis* to Kant and the citizen-judge.⁴³⁸ This is a modulation, not a break, but it does help us to see the Eichmann trial was important to her, and why she might return to it when she wrote *The Life of the Mind*.⁴³⁹

This chapter will continue to track the fate of judgment in Arendt, a path that runs at least as far back as ‘Understanding and Politics’. Apart from this I also continue to read Arendt through the lens of Kantian reflective judgment. Judgment is a red thread running through her later work; and judgment – as *poiesis* and legislation – also helps us to clarify the great themes she is tackling here: natality and the possibility of politics as a guarantor of a meaningful life. The issue of Judgment, always implicit in her work, becomes an explicit problem after 1960 or so. As such, it is a key (not *the* key) to the problems first made visible in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

⁴³⁷ For an extended discussion and application of Arendt’s ideas about ‘thinking what we are doing’ see Segerberg, *Thinking Doing: The Politicisation of Thoughtless Action*, 2005, *passim*.

⁴³⁸ See Mark Antaki ‘What Does it Mean to Think About Politics?’ In Berkowitz et. al. 2010, p. 68 for the suggestion that the significance of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* for Arendt grew as she increasingly emphasised the rejection of absolutes and the centrality of plurality in politics (he also suggests that the private/public split in Arendt is a weakness, but that she –like Carl Schmitt, *inter alia*, was right to emphasise a distinct ‘space’ of politics).

⁴³⁹ See Kohn ‘Evil and Plurality’ for a good discussion of the relation between banal/radical evil and ‘Kantian’ judgment. Kohn’s perspective provides a useful corrective, in my view, to Wellmer’s ‘Habermasian’ critique of Arendt in his ‘Hannah Arendt on Judgment’. Both are collected in May and Kohn, 1996.

The Life of the Mind is in three parts. Following Kant, Arendt divides her book into thinking, willing and judging (we shall not be concerned here with ‘willing’). Again following Kant, she distinguishes knowing as a mental operation concerned with facts, things we can know, from true thinking, which is ‘resultless’. This latter is the pursuit of meaning, and it is forever unfinished, weaving a web of thought around questions that can have no single, definitive answer: ‘what is the meaning of this event?’ ‘what does my action here amount to?’ questioning and self questioning, rather than accepting the given. This kind of thought has a moral and political significance. Arendt remarks that this is the speciality of a certain type -what we might call the ‘awkward squad’. This might remind us of Milgram’s experiments (themselves inspired in part by Arendt) that distinguished between those who follow authority and obey orders from the minority that question the orders and *refuse* to be compliant.⁴⁴⁰ We might think too of the difference between Sophie Scholl and the *White Rose*, and of Adolf Eichmann. The capacity to think is central to any concept of a political life as to think is to give oneself a chance of not being a tool of power, or a particle in a mass. It is also the indispensable precondition for judgment.

Action brings the new into the world, and the Twentieth Century has seen a lot of ‘new’. Natality, the precious faculty of beginning, is by definition the advent of the unprecedented, that which exceeds our pre-existing categories; this is why Arendt claims that we must ‘think without bannisters’. Most judgments are based on rule and precedent, and rightly so as judgment (with its precipitate, law) is the frame that encloses the stable, shared world (law as congealed judgment). This is determinate judgment. Determinate judgment becomes less useful, even positively dangerous, when tradition and custom have been ruptured. Looking back at *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution* it is possible to see her developing sense of this crisis (or

⁴⁴⁰ See Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* 2010, *passim*.

kairos, which also means ‘opportunity’).

As we have seen, *On Revolution* is a vital text for grasping Arendt’s line of thought. In it, the possibility of humans acting together to create something new receives sustained attention. It is notable that in her treatment of this theme she makes the characteristic move of introducing two familiar ‘limits’, which define a *topos* of human political activity. Both have attracted criticism. The first ‘limit’ divides the active citizens as a kind of self-selecting elite of political actors from the rest, a move that repeats Arendt’s ‘Kantian’ distinction between judges (*sensus communis*), and those who use mere common human understanding (common sense). If, as I have tried to show, this is an unsatisfactory distinction, it nevertheless reflects a willingness to confront the problem so often passed over by others - that of the gulf between those who continue to act in the public sphere after the revolution has lost its initial, founding energy and those who do not or cannot. There is an interesting comparison here with Sartre’s roughly contemporary treatment in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* of ‘fused groups’, ‘seriality’ etc.⁴⁴¹ Sartre, like Arendt, is concerned both with the numbing effects of quotidian life in bourgeois society and the way in which revolutions lose their dynamism.

The other limit is the line running between the political and the social. Arendt is vulnerable here, too, for who decides what shall be the political?⁴⁴² Nevertheless, there is a point being made that we should not miss: the ‘non natural’ character of the political dimension of collective human life, the political as part of the fabric of work and culture, and as such, something in need of constant repair.⁴⁴³ Finally, as we shall see, Arendt’s problematical distinctions raise nothing less than the question of political subjectivity in

⁴⁴¹ Sartre, 2004, *passim*.

⁴⁴² As Benhabib remarks, we have to think ‘with Arendt against Arendt’ and be ready to ask Arendtian questions and provide non-Arendtian answers. My answers would not be Benhabib’s ‘Habermasian’ ones, however. See Benhabib, 1996, p. 198.

⁴⁴³ This is partly why Arendt emphasises *amor mundi* – love of the world – expressed as the willingness of people to take shared responsibility for the structures that make a world and that allow us to appear as individuals among others. This amounts to the great political, rather than moral, virtue of building and preserving the ‘house of man’.

modernity, a question that was already implicit in Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*.⁴⁴⁴

Imagination, Judgment, Law

Judgment involves production and legislation, but it is the enigma of production (*poesis*) that emerges as the key to judgment when the Law can no longer be received *simpliciter* from Tradition or Divine Authority. This is because once enlightenment rejects any authority beyond itself as merely the legacy of humanity's tutelage, whether this be theological, philosophical or that of the state, its task is to grasp the role of judgment as the self-conscious activity of the judges themselves. The question becomes: what regulates judgment? As Kant recognised, production and legislation have a 'blind but indispensable power', one that eludes measure and estimation because it is the *condition* of measure: the Imagination. And so the role of imagination in judgment comes to the fore. However, this power never stops to present itself, as it flashes between understanding and sensibility, or works invisibly beyond both as the power of synthesis. In one guise it appears as the adjunct to the legislative power of the Understanding. But the faithful servant of this understanding is also its master; it is disciplined by the very Law it puts in motion. This " 'common but to us unknown root' of sensibility and understanding" nevertheless seems to lack its own place.⁴⁴⁵ And this homelessness has a political meaning.

An emancipated judgment needs to avoid the theological, positivist or irrationalist accounts of the sources of judgment. A radical account of judgment cannot be content with imagination exiled from either Reason (as sublimity) or from Nature, (as underlabourer of the understanding). And it cannot allow imagination as *mysterium*, an ineffable

⁴⁴⁴ See the final chapter of the present work.

⁴⁴⁵ Arendt, 1982: Arendt citing Kant.

x transcending the political. The imagination must be located *in* the political *topos*, which means within or between the judges themselves. Enlightened Judgment here actively discriminates, accepting or rejecting, and *knowing itself* as critical and creative. This is the manner in which natality becomes possible, avoiding temptations to locate authority outside or beyond the plural space of judgment.⁴⁴⁶

The first two parts of *The Life of the Mind* take Arendt's preoccupation with knowing/thinking and freedom/action forward, while the third, Judging, revisits the question of a visible public space and human plurality.⁴⁴⁷ Together they amount to a meditation on the questions of modernity: the possibility of a properly human and affirming relation to a world⁴⁴⁸. They are *contra* nihilism, taking further the questions raised in the earlier work concerning meaning and love of the world (*amor mundi*).⁴⁴⁹ These preoccupations around judgment become explicit, are pursued and then broken off with the lecture notes on Kant (published posthumously as *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 1982). When Arendt reads Kant we see two strands of her thinking. The first is political phenomenology: human worth and meaning are connected to the maintenance of a public space in which actors appear for and to each other. The other is judgment: the discriminations of the spectator on what is happening.⁴⁵⁰ These are mutually implicated: the public space is a *topos* and ecology for judgment. Judgment is a way of illuminating the judging subjects, *and* the inventive play of law and freedom, which builds

⁴⁴⁶ See Chapter 2 of the present work.

⁴⁴⁷ For a critical account of the kind of selfhood Arendt proposes see Jacobitti, *Hannah Arendt and the Will* in Allen 2008 pp. 201-224. Dossa, (1989) holds that Arendt never really developed her views of judgment, and that in any case since judgment involves the spectator, rather than the actor, it is 'hard to see how her view of judgment...can be construed as political' (p.145). Clearly, it has been the purpose of this discussion to show judgment in a very different light. Dossa's position may follow from his emphasis on Arendt's view of the public realm as a relation to the ancient polis. Kant hardly figures at all in his book.

⁴⁴⁸ See Disch, 1994 p.171 for support of the view that *The Life of the Mind* and the unfinished work on judgment continue Arendt's political concerns.

⁴⁴⁹ Canovan's discussion of this part of Arendt's work gains its strength from her careful assessment and understanding of the role of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as the root of her thinking about modernity. She convincingly shows the way in which Arendt's thought developed out of her meditations in that book. Where she is less satisfying is in her relative neglect of the developing conception of judgment in Arendt's thought. She discusses it here and there, but her interpretation is heavily dependent on Beiner and does not get any extended treatment. See Canovan, 1992, pp. 269-72.

⁴⁵⁰ See Honig, in Allen 2008, 225-246 for an account of the self in Arendt that is sympathetic but essentially 'deconstructive'. This view has some similarities with Villa but is the polar opposite to Jacobitti (In Allen, 2008).

and sustains the structures indispensable to a free life. So whether judgment is considered as mere common sense or as *sensus communis*, imagination is installed in a central position. Yet imagination is a strangely elusive thing in Kant's philosophy; and this elusiveness is carried over from Kant to Arendt.

According to Kant, imagination is distinguished as either empirical and reproductive or poetic and productive. The former is the handmaid of the understanding, mediating between intuition and concept through the schemata. It is also the agent of memory in its derivative, empirical role. So it plays its part in the regime of common sense, facilitating determinate judgments in their work and maintaining continuity with the past, which it *recollects*. This is the *conservative* imagination. In contrast, the productive imagination is futural, eschewing imitation and rule following, presenting the *sensus communis* with the new: this is the *radical* imagination. For Kant it is also involved with the feeling of pleasure in its free play with the understanding.⁴⁵¹ But beyond all this it is the very ground of the possibility of any synthesis, which is the 'result of the power of the imagination, a blind but indispensable power of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious.'⁴⁵² Imagination, then, cannot be overestimated, but at the same time remains strangely out of focus. It is a spontaneity of which we remain only half conscious, even as it founds our knowledge. So the question for us is: what is the role of this strange faculty for a 'phenomenological politics'?

In her seminar on imagination (1970), Arendt remarks on the comprehensive and fundamental role it has in making our syntheses possible,⁴⁵³ connecting Kant's remark on the 'art concealed within the depths of the human soul' with the Parmidean account of *nous* as the awareness of the non-appearing in appearance (i.e. The Ontological

⁴⁵¹ Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, para 22.

⁴⁵² Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A 78/ B 103.

⁴⁵³ First published in Arendt, 1982, pp. 79-85.

Difference). This line of thought isn't pursued further, and she turns to Kant's account of the schematism to make her point that 'the same faculty, imagination, which provides schemata for cognition, provides examples for judgment'. The imagination as schemata is in or between us all, and enables us to communicate, to assent or dissent. The example, as analogy to the schema, 'is the particular that is supposed to contain a concept or a general rule.'⁴⁵⁴ Thus it is the example of Achilles that is in the mind of the Greek who judges 'without any derivation of general rules "that man has courage"'. She adds: 'the judgment is exemplary to the extent that the example is rightly chosen'. The criterion for a correct choice cannot be specified, the way we select an historical incident then proceed to make it 'exemplary - to see in the particular what is valid for more than one case.'⁴⁵⁵

What is the principle of selection here? Something seems to direct our grasp of particulars. Arendt doesn't consider in this seminar one contender for this role: the connection between imagination and feeling we find in *The Critique of Judgment*. Perhaps a more 'utopian' or radical take on this might give *nous* a futural inflection, with imagination as excessive to phenomena, enabling the illumination of the present by the light of the not-yet.⁴⁵⁶ This would be a feeling of affirmation of the good in the present which is not deducible from the *polis* as it is now, but, in a way that is connected to will and memory, to things as they *might be*. It would be accountable to the present and the past, but not determined by either of them. This feeling wouldn't be a simple 'pleasure' but it would be a kind of feeling, and an openness to possibility in the present informed by imagination: hope. This would be one way of being 'at home in the world' as it is now without being content with the way things are.⁴⁵⁷ One sees the present in the light of an imagined future.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 84.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 85.

⁴⁵⁶ Somewhat in the manner of Bloch's *vor-schein*.

⁴⁵⁷ See Curtis, 1999 passim for the argument that Arendt's 'political ontology' allows us to consider the sense of the real – to be in a world of others, and to be aware of the ethical demand that accompanies that form of life. Curtis summarises his position in pp. 20-22.

In ‘Taste as a kind of *sensus communis*’ in *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant comments on the enlarged mentality, where the judgment of taste transcends the merely personal or agreeable, a way of thinking that Arendt identifies as connected to a view of the role of the citizen and not the philosopher in the exercise of judgment:

..this, no matter how slight may be the range and degree of a person’s natural endowments, still indicates a man with a *broadened way of thinking* if he overrides the private subjective conditions of his judgment, into which so many others are locked, as it were, and reflects on his own judgment from a universal standpoint (which he can determine only by transferring himself to the judgment of others).⁴⁵⁸

Arendt makes much of this idea of the enlarged mentality in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, but with significant changes. In the 12th session she distinguishes between two mental operations in judging. The first is the imaginative work of presenting to the inner sense the object that is not present, which is judged according to the ‘it-pleases/it-displeases me’ of the inner sense (‘it is called taste because like taste it chooses’ p. 69). Then we get the second stage, the ‘operation of reflection’ -the approval or disapproval of the fact that it pleases; the criterion of this second operation is communicability. The judge is thus liberated from the merely private perspective.⁴⁵⁹ This is a simplified version of the Kantian account of taste. We should note that in Arendt’s translation of the passage above ‘allgemein’ is rendered as *general*, not *universal*. As Beiner notes in his edition of the work, this is a consistent translation by Arendt, which has significant implications for her reading of Kant. He connects it with her remarks in ‘The Crisis in Culture’ (in *Between Past and Future*) where she stresses judgments as general, not universal. Kant says: “judgment is valid for every single judging person’. The emphasis in the sentence is on *judging*; it is not valid for those who do not judge, or for those who are

⁴⁵⁸ *The Critique of Judgment*, para 40.

⁴⁵⁹ See Meehan on Arendt’s self and intersubjectivity in ‘Arendt and the Shadow of the Other’ in Allen, 2008 pp. 247-257.

not members of the public realm where the objects of judgment appear.⁴⁶⁰ This may remind us of those passages in *On Revolution* where Arendt sees the public realm of the revolutionary as composed of a self-selecting (democratic?) elite of judges and actors. Arendt clearly means not the transcendental conditions for judgments of taste, where the promised harmony of our powers invite us to communicate delight, but the empirical conditions under which judgment *may* (but need not) meet with agreement from others. It is at this point that Arendt's reading diverges most clearly from that of Lyotard, who is not slow to criticise her 'anthropologised' and empirical approach 'although she is not the only one'. The passage from Kant that Lyotard cites runs as follows:

Now if this universality [of taste] is not based on a collection of votes, a recollection of voices and interrogation of others as to what sort of sensations they experience, but is to rest, as it were, upon an autonomy of the subject passing judgment on the feeling of pleasure (in the given representation), i.e. it must rest upon his own taste and yet it is also not to be derived from concepts.⁴⁶¹

What is at play for Lyotard is the accord of the voices of the imagination and understanding, a harmony promised in the encounter with a particular form. The faculties, unconstrained by the demands of knowledge or morality, promise, but *only* promise, universality and necessity in the singular encounter with form:

The pleasure of the beautiful promises, demands, gives the example of a communicated happiness. There will never be proof that this happiness is communicated, even when individuals or cultures empirically agree to recognise forms given by nature or art as beautiful.⁴⁶²

This reading of the communication of taste, of the *sensus communis*, avoids the problem of dissensus between subjects by keeping judgment free of the merely empirical. These are the transcendental conditions of the judgment of the beautiful, not the actual agreement or disagreement of others with our judgment. Lyotard admits that other

⁴⁶⁰ *Between Past and Future*, p. 221.

⁴⁶¹ *The Critique of Judgment*, para 31.

⁴⁶² Lyotard, 1994, p.19.

passages in *The Critique of Judgment* might support a more Arendtian reading (paragraph 36 for example), but he goes on in chapter 8 of his *Lectures on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1994) to try to demolish them. There is a political meaning to this austere 'transcendental' reading, devoid of concern with dissensus. It is the Postmodern avoidance of politics and of the possibility of solidarity, a kind of aesthetic of fragmentation in which the subject never achieves a political disclosure in a shared *topos*. It is debatable whether Kant's text admits such a reading. For instance, Kant's 'comment' in paragraph 38 ('Deduction of Judgments of Taste') might be read as meaning that even with the accord of knowledge powers, judgments of taste can be applied in a 'faulty' manner. If this is right, then judgment cannot begin and end in the play of powers in an autonomous judge. The historical and culturally specific other is significant. In any case, Arendt's 'general' rather than 'universal' signals an attempt to adapt or turn Kant's account towards the political. We could support this by citing those parts of the text that emphasise the manner in which judgment is embedded in a specific historical context (his comments on the 'education of taste' for instance). In the end, Arendt is doing what all original thinkers do to their influences: she is giving a 'strong reading' in which Kant is adapted and applied in line with her preoccupations.⁴⁶³ Arendt is not simply repeating Kant: she is recasting his work on aesthetic judgment in the light of her political thinking. For her, individual judgment implies others, even when they are not present.⁴⁶⁴ Lyotard's problem with her reading, is, as I've suggested, more than a discomfort with an 'inaccurate' or disputed interpretation: it is *political*. His politics accounts for his answer to the question of the plurality of judges, which is connected to his general tendency to aestheticise the

⁴⁶³ See Beiner, *Op Cit* pp. 99-100 for a similar argument. He views Kant's judgment as being essentially monological and transcendental; for him, Arendt has (creatively) misunderstood the point that Kant's account of aesthetic and moral judgment involve a purgation of judgment of any contamination from the merely heteronymous –i.e., the judgments of any real others.

⁴⁶⁴ Jennifer Nedelsky argues against Beiner to the effect that autonomy itself requires a relation to real others (a 'relational autonomy'). I suspect that whatever the merits of Nedelsky's reading, it is Beiner who has got Kant right here. But as we've seen, this need not matter. See 'Judgment, Diversity and Relational Autonomy', *passim*, in Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001.

postmodern political condition in a way quite foreign to Arendt.⁴⁶⁵

Lyotard's comment that 'she is not the only one' to socialise and anthropologise the aesthetic of taste may be a reference to his old comrade in arms Cornelius Castoriadis.⁴⁶⁶ Castoriadis also connects the judgment of taste with the empirical conditions under which consensus may be sought. In 'The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy' (in his *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, 1991) he denies that *The Critique of Judgment* can provide the model for judgment that Arendt wants, but he opposes her from the other flank, as it were, that of the historical and cultural: '[*The Critique of Judgment*] describes the primitive circle of socio-historical creation without actually understanding it'.⁴⁶⁷ Castoriadis goes on to argue that taste is embedded in a particular socio-historical context, in which a given culture composed of non-trivially different judges agree on the beautiful. But they must not be *too* different: '“art”...is much more strongly and deeply linked to the kernel of a society's imaginary significations than is “knowledge of things.”'⁴⁶⁸ For Castoriadis, *The Critique of Judgment* is at its most suggestive around the question of production (*poiesis*), or 'creation', as he calls it, rather than judgment. But judgment has the two moments -of *poiesis* and legislation - and these are connected to the important point that politics is about multiplicity. Arendt strives to keep the political as a dimension of human life open to plural subjectivities in (often) agonistic relations to each other; a space of dissensus which practically defines political life. Despite Castoriadis' valuable work on the 'project of autonomy' and his emphasis on the relation between the social and the individual, he seems to miss this 'meso-level' of the multiplicity of subjects, as, somewhat ironically, does his ex-comrade Lyotard. Where Arendt is at her weakest lies, not in her emphasis on the shared space of appearance, but on her rather

⁴⁶⁵ For an account of Judgment that draws heavily on Kant but then goes in the 'aestheticised' and fragmented direction I have referred to, see Lyotard's *The Differend* (1989).

⁴⁶⁶ They had both been members of the revolutionary libertarian socialist group 'Socialisme ou Barbarie.'

⁴⁶⁷ Castoriadis, 1991 p. 92.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 95.

questionable grasp of the political as anything but the social.⁴⁶⁹ What the subject of politics is lies open: as Castoriadis might have said, the struggle to extend the freedom of the working class is a social-political project.

Arendt's contribution is indispensable, however, and it is through her developing conception of judgment that we can best see this. Kantian judgment, which she adopts and modifies to her purposes, has the merit of keeping the productive, creative aspect of human affairs balanced with the legislative, the law and constitution-building dimension. Thus the new occurs in a visible space, delineated by *homo faber* but not dominated by him; the new occurs in a fashion that is accountable to history and tradition but not bound by either. Lyotard chides Arendt for her 'anthropologising and sociologising' of the *sensus communis*, while Castoriadis argues that she does not go far enough in that direction, and that she is too concerned with a transcendental foundation to our judgments. Arendt, though, is holding a line that keeps it clear that real people's political lives are what are at stake, while searching for a principle that will aid us in both coming to terms with the past and making a future that does not merely repeat its formulae and its mistakes.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ See N Fraser, 'Communication, Transformation and Consciousness Raising', esp. pp. 174-5, in Calhoun & McGowan 1997. Fraser insists that we must keep institutional inequality and injustice in focus. In her view 'talk of judgment in abstraction from justice is an evasion, if not a fraud' (p.175). I agree.

⁴⁷⁰ See Brenkman, *The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy* 2007, passim, for a study of the post-9/11 world and its *realpolitik* that draws on Arendt for many of its insights into power and violence. For a consideration of Arendt's last work that stresses the independence of thinking, willing and judging from each other see Young-Bruhl, 'Reflections on the Life of the Mind' in Hinchman and Hinchman 1994 pp. 335-364.

Chapter 6

Proper and Improper Subjects: Hannah Arendt and the Emergence of Judgment

1

I have argued that Arendt's appropriation and application of Kantian themes in *The Critique of Judgment* are of great interest both in understanding Arendt on judgment and for their own sake. We have also seen that there are problems with these ideas. These problems are: (1) *Who* is a political subject – who counts as a judge, or a political actor? (2) *What* is the political – is it a distinct zone, space or practice? These are not just problems for Arendt, of course: they are central to the question of political ontology, and the literature on them is vast. My aim in the following pages is the modest one of considering the fate of Arendt's thought on judgment, and especially that of these two problems, in the light of the way three influential theorists have responded to her: Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière. A number of points emerge. Firstly, Hannah Arendt is a thinker these theorists find difficult to read, for various reasons; second, Arendt's perspective, though open to criticism, is a valuable one in helping us to think about what 'the political' is and might be; third, that the two problems of political ontology are, at root, *one* problem.

Judgment is crucial to this ontology of political subjectivity. Hannah Arendt's development and transformation of Kant's conception of judgment, as presented in the *Critique of Judgment*, demands continued attention, which it has not always received. This is

just as true for when she seems to get things wrong as for when she is on target. She has a capacity to state a problem or propose a way of thinking about it that is often fertile in its very provocativeness.⁴⁷¹ What she seeks to provoke is further *thinking*. Her success in doing this is an important reason why her work will be a vital resource as the twenty-first century continues. This includes what she has to say about judgment in politics. To appreciate what Arendt has to say on this head one must recall the matrix or constellation of ideas that accompany the concept, many of which she loads with a special significance: plurality, thinking, natality, action, labour etc. Taken together, these thought trains constitute the main body of her thinking that will continue to live.⁴⁷² And at the centre lies judgment.

Arendt took Kant's conception of aesthetic (reflective) judgment and applied it to politics. Reflective judgment has, among other things, the quality of being operative in the absence of precedents and rules, of being plural (there is never only one judge) and of being disclosive (the judgment one makes reveals who one is to the others present). Its value for Arendt lies in the way it can be applied to a public world, one that is essentially between judging individuals. Thus it helps her to think afresh about the way in which we might find ourselves as one-among-others in a shared world. This idea of a shared world connects to her phenomenological view that the public world is the meaningful world; that the private and hidden, though not necessarily without value, lacks a certain kind of reality. It is a *privation*. For Arendt, the practice of judging is one in which we find a place for ourselves in a world already fashioned by others in the past. History provides us with the setting and the constraints, which constitute the frame of the possible; tradition

⁴⁷¹ Examples of Arendt's capacity to propose controversial but suggestive ideas might include: the banality of evil thesis, the exclusion of 'social' questions from the political, her conclusion in *On Revolution* that democratic participation might have to be limited to a minority of active citizens, and even her use of Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* as a way of thinking about political judgment.

⁴⁷² The phrase is used in RJ Bernstein, 'Is Evil Banal? A Misleading Question', p. 131-2, in Berkowitz et. al. 2010, and also by Canovan in the introduction to Canovan, 1994.

appears in the form of rule and precedent. Neither can bind reflective judgment. The possibility of bringing something utterly new and *unprecedented* is always there. The ‘political’ nature of judgment stems largely from the way in which this process cannot be palmed off onto experts, or on any other agent other than that of the citizens judging together. These judgments cannot be the coercive ones of determinate judgment, but the more provisional ones of *doxa*, of opinion. For Arendt, as for Kant, judgment depends on the responsive network of judges, each confirming or repudiating the judgment of the others.

It is here we meet our first problem. As we saw in Kant, this conception of the *sensus communis* of the judges seems to mean that criteria and authority for judgment lies with the other judges: ‘Taste’. Once we introduce this idea we have the problem of those who *have* taste, the marker for membership in the *sensus communis*, and of those who do not. As we saw, Kant does not think everybody can be a member of this club of good judges, as there are those who are incompetent either because of a constitutional impediment or because of a lack of cultivation. Circularity obtains: the judge with taste may be recognised by his good judgments, which are confirmed by the judgments of the *sensus communis*. This already has a ‘political’ implication to it, even before Arendt explicitly applies it to political deliberation.⁴⁷³ What makes the problem an interesting one is that it shows the problem enlightenment and cultivation have from the start, a problem of the ‘Other’, who may be more or less politely characterised (by the cultivated) as the people, the uncultivated, the rabble or the *ochlos*.⁴⁷⁴ The problem of who is a competent judge, or proper political subject, persists in Arendt’s discussions in *Between Past and Future*, *On Revolution* and elsewhere. This is not just because Arendt has a ‘conservative

⁴⁷³ We shall see that Jacques Ranciere is alive to this connection to the way in which our aesthetics (as a way of sorting the shared world) connects to politics.

⁴⁷⁴ I’m using the term in Ranciere’s sense of indistinct mass or mob, contrasted with *demos*. See his *On the Shores of Politics* especially pp. 31-34.

side'. It is because the question returns to practically all post-enlightenment thinking about democratic politics. And it is a question for radicals, too, for it is the radical who projects a revolutionary mobilisation of society, and who is confronted by the apathy and passivity of 'the people'.

This brings us to our second problem, the 'what' of politics, or of political space. Arendt has been charged with wanting to keep politics as something separate from social or economic issues, as a kind of purified zone or area. This is a fair charge, but before we consider it, we should look again at her insistence on the specificity of politics.⁴⁷⁵ Why might Arendt's insistence that politics not be submerged in the social sphere be relevant to us now, particularly if we are interested in radical change? The answer to this is best framed in terms of the kind of 'politics' that we now see in 'The West'. If we apply 'Arendtian' criteria to what politics is and should be, that is, the exercise of public judgments and actions by free citizens, the outlook is pretty bleak. Twenty-first century democratic politics are 'squeezed' relentlessly by other forces, especially those of global capitalism. Everywhere the bottom line – the extraction of value – dominates. Politics itself becomes a kind of spectator sport, presented through the media to an at best half attentive population immersed in the distractions, anxieties and pleasures of 'private life', especially consumption in its various forms. Power and wealth are in practice distributed unequally. The avowed goal of the political parties, which resemble large corporations or marketing companies, led by politicians who can be sold like commodities, is restricted to a rising standard of living, defined as material affluence and achieved through unending economic growth. This is a far cry from the kind of imagined space of those who, through their judgment and by acting with others (what Arendt calls genuine power), disclose who they are to each other and what it is that lies between them – a world.

⁴⁷⁵ In, for example, *On Revolution*, *passim*.

Arendt's achievement is in part to connect the search for meaning with the care for this shared world: an *amor mundi*. The notion of space, in which some kind of disclosure becomes possible, arises in part from the inheritance of the *polis*, but also the Kantian notion of aesthetic judgment that Arendt has continued and which thinks phenomenologically, ie in terms of appearance. One can therefore see the motivation in wanting to keep a zone free from the forces that hobble freedom in the way described above; a way of preserving this characteristic human ability to be political, which is a central part of what it is to be a human-with-others, not a mere agency for regulating the appetites and aspirations of the privatised self.⁴⁷⁶ 'The political' is supposed to be the possibility of *freedom*, whether conceived as a zone, a practice or an event. It is where humans become *visible* to each other as something other than creatures who get and spend, or even make and sell. The political animal judges and acts, and these actions with others have the power to bring about the unforeseen, the new and incalculable. It is this, for Arendt, which marks out the political as the thing that shows us our unique capacity. To become political is to think, judge and act in a way that acknowledges the presence of different others who also perform the same operation. It is the opposite of the blank serialism of the wholly administered society.

But this attempt to maintain the specificity or purity of politics immediately generates our problem with the location of space or zone. For 'the political' must be related to the other things humans do. The alternative is to quarantine the 'matter' of politics away from the area of 'pure' politics, leaving an empty form (political judgment and action) separated from 'unpolitical' content. But it is precisely this 'unpolitical' content that comprehends the injustice and oppression that principled political action

⁴⁷⁶ It is in this concern with the political and plural character of humanity that Arendt's Aristotelian and Kantian strands somewhat converge.

would seek to combat. So any satisfactory account of what it is to judge and act politically needs to abolish this separation *without* losing a sense of the specifically political. In addition, one has only to state the problem to see that the ‘what’ of the political is inextricably linked to the ‘whom’. The liberal-utilitarian managed and mediated pseudo politics seem to reproduce the very subjects Arendt suspects are unable to think, judge and act.⁴⁷⁷ The bleakest account of the triumph of the private over the public good has ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’ replaced by ‘health, security, pleasure.’⁴⁷⁸ This is the rule of Arendt’s *homo laborans* or Nietzsche’s ‘Last Man’: of the solipsistic individual, where narcissism, and the politics of *ressentiment* thrive in an essentially worldless, nihilistic context, one in which thinking, judging and acting are at a premium. Imagining where a revived politics might happen must also give thought to what kind of people are supposed to be doing the politics; but if those people are really as incapable as the above description suggests, the temptation to despair, and resort to a variety of elitism of the left or right will be hard to resist. The challenge here would be to bring the political and the social together while remaining true to the Arendtian insight that politics is something distinct.

This apparent disregard for the social/economic in favour of something called ‘the political’ or the public sphere has been a major issue for commentators and critics of Arendt. And there is warrant for this in her writing.⁴⁷⁹ But it might be worth considering just what we mean when we talk of zones or spheres in this way. There seems to be difficulty in imagining ‘the political,’ a difficulty that may itself be symptomatic. Is it

⁴⁷⁷ For an interesting discussion of the way in which ‘technoculture’ mediates and traps subjects, see Jodi Dean’s discussion of what she calls ‘communicative capitalism’ in Dean, 2002, 2009 and 2010, *passim*.

⁴⁷⁸ See Hervé Juvin’s discussion of the ‘reinvention of humanity’: Juvin, 2010, p. 158.

⁴⁷⁹ This view crops up numerous times in her work. Perhaps her most provocative statement of it is to be found in her ‘Reflections on Little Rock’, originally published in *Dissent*, January and February 1959 and now collected in Arendt 2003, pp. 193–214. The context was the use of black children in the struggle to desegregate US schools. Arendt actually identifies *three* realms: The public, the social and the private. As Berkowitz indicates in his essay ‘Solitude and the Activity of Thinking’ (in Berkowitz et. al., 2010) Arendt is not defending segregated schools but rather pointing out the way in which the government action to attack social discrimination may ‘erode the walls of privacy that nourish the possibility of thinking and of acting –and thus of uniqueness and plurality’ (p. 244).

something that occurs in a kind of *space*? a specific *practice*? an unusual kind of *event*, one that occurs rarely, in revolutions and other dislocations of ‘normal’ social life? Each attempt brings with it metaphors which seem to limit as well as enlarge our understanding of what we are discussing and it is as well if we stay sensitive to them. A weakness of the ‘topological’ approach I have been pursuing might be that it leads us to assume that the zones cannot or ought not to be thought together. We might want rather to distinguish the political and the economic or social as distinctive *practices* and ways of interacting with others, rather than as separate zones. Then we might find it easier to see the way in which a group of people might switch from one to the other, or the way in which the practices of the *oikos* might be considered in a political light. An unArendtian thought, perhaps, but one that seems plausible. But then why separate them in the first place?

What in part distinguishes the political as a practice or situation, is that it requires the presence of others to the self in a manner that does not reduce them to mere means. The attraction of spatial imagery is that it seems natural to picture the way in which we appear to each other when we judge as singular beings in a space, alongside others, and not merely acting on or with a nameless mass. One problem with this is that it has trouble keeping the other things we do in the picture. We want to imagine it happening in the factory, the co-operative or even the shopping mall, yet remaining distinct from the passive and privatised behaviour that is the norm in such spaces. Perhaps, then, it is a higher ‘level’ or layer of experience, potentially superimposed on the others, appearing at times of crisis or political upheaval. But this superimposition of politics on the more quotidian *topoi* still seems forced and unreal, as well as being static and unrelated – as if it were a layer of a virtual *mille feuilles* in which any of the layers could become prominent by moving from the virtual to the actual.

The challenge is to think of ‘the political’ as a kind of *topos* of disclosure, where individuals reveal who they are through their judgments, where action is possible, which remains embedded but *not* overwhelmed and obscured in the other practices and real experiences of people. The difficulty with the kind of ‘spatial’ approach we have been discussing is that it seems to invite the return of a kind of ‘common sense’ approach to the political that conceals rather than reveals the forces that connect, transform and divide the complex modernity of ‘Late Capitalism’. Something more dialectical is required. We shall return this problem through the consideration of Arendt in the texts of three influential theorists.

2

Arendt’s presence on the current scene is quite paradoxical. On the one hand, many of her insights have been hailed as prescient and obviously relevant to our time.⁴⁸⁰ On the other hand she remains a marginal figure for many of the most influential of radical theorists, even when they seem to be interested in the same issues, and even when they repeat, re-use or adapt her ideas. It is as if she were still an embarrassment. This may be because of her *unclassifiability*: she is hard to place on the left-right axis, a fierce critic of liberalism who seems to have supplied that same mode of thought with one of its crucial concepts (‘totalitarianism’) locking her for some into a cold war liberal imaginary; a female thinker who is not a feminist, a political theorist uninterested in Hegel, Freud or the Frankfurt School and with no obvious *magnum opus* as an epitome of her thought. So she returns like a symptom of something repressed and hard to deal with. Someone who is hard to digest.

⁴⁸⁰ E.g. Young-Bruehl, 2009; Villa, 1999; Beiner & Nedelsky, 2001 etc.

The Arendt most often cited by those who have not read her amount to catch words that miss the point of her work, and, at worst, lead to serious misrepresentations of what she has to say. Outside of those works dedicated to her thought, and sometimes even in them, she most often appears as a kind of intellectual silhouette – a flattened target, appearing briefly in a text as a kind of marker. So she can't be made to easily fit into the typical concerns of today's critical theorists. Yet to be a protean thinker of this kind is also a strength, and is perhaps a sign that she indeed 'thinks without bannisters'. She is addressing questions with which we urgently need to engage, particularly through the problem of judgment and the constellation of problems related to that concept. However, with honourable exceptions, the major radical thinkers of the last twenty-five years or so have failed to draw on her work in a positive way. Rather, she all too often puts in a brief appearance in their works in order to be disposed of as a liberal, addicted to 'mere common sense', promoting the elevation of the political over the economic and so on. Of course there is something in all those claims, but it remains the case that to stop with those limited perceptions of her work is seriously to underestimate the contribution of this formidable political philosopher. Arguably the most serious piece of misrecognition and misrepresentation is to see her as a liberal. This she is not. As we have seen, her critique of the 'liberal-bourgeois' society of the nineteenth and early Twentieth Century is withering: she saw it as a betrayal of the promise of the enlightenment by the possessive individualism of the bourgeoisie. And her stance connects directly to her contempt for the consumerism of the Twentieth Century USA. If she is an apologist for US liberalism she is a very strange one.

She has been accused of trying to eat her cake and have it: as a critic of liberal modernity, she nonetheless adheres to the rules, rights and norms of that society.⁴⁸¹ There is some justice in this observation. Yet a glance at the context in which she thought and acted would be useful. She had witnessed and experienced what happens when such norms are thrown over, in Germany and elsewhere. Arendt had a sense of the fragility of these constructions. She had a strong sense of the importance of institutions as ways in which political subjects can exercise their capacities as plural subjects, and the effects of Nazi and Stalinist efforts to level them.⁴⁸² It was this experience that was the context for her interest in Kant's theory of reflective judgment. But a demand for due process or the rights of the citizen should not be read as a commitment to them as final limits to all future political progress, or to an 'end of history' thesis. Arendt is a particularistic thinker, with a strong sense of the here and now of rights and constitutions – and she is averse to the windy generalisations of 'human rights' discourse, which too often ignore the real limits to the ability or willingness of states to go beyond their borders and national laws. This is part of her realism, not an expression of her love of the liberal states of the Twentieth Century. This stance, in the age of Guantanamo, signals her continuing relevance. Add to this her critique of the passivity of modern populations; the degeneration of politics into a spectator sport; the habitual lying of governments to their own people; the reduction of citizens into masses of infantilised consumers, bodies fit for the production/consumption cycle, surveillance, 'special measures' and states of emergency, and we have anything but an anachronistic figure.

And she is the celebrant of revolution, of power as the mobilisation of people against the violence of the state. Again, contemporary events seem to indicate that she

⁴⁸¹ Pippin: 'Hannah Arendt and the Bourgeois Origins of Totalitarian Evil' pp. 146-167 in Pippin, 2005. Pippin, unlike many liberal commentators, sees the Marxian strain in Arendt's condemnation of bourgeois acquisitiveness, but unlike myself he does not accept her condemnation of the liberal-bourgeois world as the precursor of totalitarianism.

⁴⁸² See the final section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *passim*.

may have something to say to the inheritors of the ‘Velvet Revolution’ and the ‘Arab Spring’, including her sharp eye for the way in which revolutions are deformed and lost. For Arendt revolution is a permanent possibility because founding something, making it new, is always a human possibility. With it come a host of problems, of course –those of constituting and constituted force, sovereignty and the loss of active citizenry in the post-revolutionary phase. If she has no really satisfactory solutions to these problems she is not alone in this. But what makes her work essential is in part the centrality of thinking, judging and acting. Judgment discloses each to the others: it is central to the constitution of political subjects and their preservation. But this ‘disclosure’ while expressive, does not reveal an essential self, or core.⁴⁸³ What we see is the emergence of the multiple dynamic citizen-self, through the practice of democratic politics. Arendt’s insistence on the manner in which such an emergence occurs, and its relation to a sense of the real and the notion of taking responsibility for the shared world we inhabit, can help us to distinguish it from the way mobs and movements work, with their broad but shallow appeal, tendency to scapegoat and inability to build anything lasting. A classic example in Arendt’s work is that of the mob in France during the Dreyfus trials; a more modern example might be the ‘Tea Party’ movement in the USA. The difference between the actions of citizens, thinking, judging and acting together and that of a mass or crowd moving together is, I would argue, that the former are taking responsibility for a shared world and are marked by a kind of concern for the truth, an imaginative concern for the place of others who are not simply copies of themselves (and can thus bear dissent).⁴⁸⁴ The latter might be characterised by the dominance of fantasy, of conspiracy theories and

⁴⁸³ This is a point Villa makes in his discussions of Arendt. See his ‘Modernity, Alienation and Critique’ in Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001 pp. 296-7.

⁴⁸⁴ It is a notable feature of the ‘Occupy’ movements that broke out in 2011 that they paid careful attention to the ways in which assent and dissent might be signalled in their ‘General Assemblies’ (and what was being occupied was, of course, public space that had often been appropriated by private interests.)

ressentiment. The former open up a world, and allows a kind of cognitive mapping;⁴⁸⁵ the latter are essentially worldless. As Slavoj Žižek has commented, the mass or crowd phenomenon is actually anti-social, composed as it is of a ‘direct conglomerate of solipsistic individuals –as the saying goes, one is lonely in a crowd.’⁴⁸⁶ He goes on to remark that this is a defining feature of contemporary global capitalism. This worldlessness of the mass is the opposite state from that of the political plurality of judgment, and Arendt is clear that it is a problematic phenomenon of modernity, in Žižek’s words: ‘a ‘worldless ideological constellation, depriving the large majority of people of any meaningful cognitive mapping’.⁴⁸⁷ Politics, Arendt reminds us, is not ethics: it is the practice of jointly making and preserving the shared meaningful world.

Arendt’s arguments and themes are informed by a global and historical sense. In 1951 (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) she traced the way in which the rule by decree, ‘administrative measures’ and the use of terror had been perfected by those outposts of European and American power in the colonies before being imported into the metropolitan centres and used against the ‘home’ populations, often by the selfsame individuals on their return from the colonies. The ‘natives’ were treated as rightless raw material for their masters before the same treatment was meted out on the home populations. Her sense that genuine politics could only thrive in conditions in which citizens could be sustained by institutions, the rule of law and a public sense of responsibility for a shared public world, emerges here, if only through the demonstration of the effects of their erosion or absence. The thought trains set in motion here are represented in *The Human Condition* and dramatised in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* but they had

⁴⁸⁵ This is Frederic Jameson’s useful term. Jameson has reflected on the attraction of conspiracy theories where ‘cognitive mapping’ is unachievable. See Jameson, 1991, p. 54 for the need for cognitive mapping and p 38 on the conspiracy theories and ‘high tech paranoia’ that may stand in for it.

⁴⁸⁶ Žižek, 2007 (b), p. 333.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 333. Žižek cites Badiou as an inspiration for this thought. He could have found it in *The Human Condition*, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, passim. The reference to Badiou is significant, as his thought recalls many of Arendt’s insights and Žižek explicitly recognises this, as we shall see.

begun at least by 1950, and arguably well before that. Arendt's turn to Kant after the latter book is a result of her grasp of the necessity for a consideration of the role of judgment, given the testimony of a man who seemed entirely devoid of the faculty, and not because of an attraction on her part to 'Kantian formalism'.

Arendt's work, then, considers a number of problems that are absolutely central to continental political philosophy, yet she seems oddly placed in the company of those philosophers. She most often appears in the margins of their work, and when she is explicitly considered it is very often in a way that does scant justice to the complex nature of what she has to say. What one looks for, and seldom gets, is something beyond mere agreement or disagreement with terms like 'totalitarianism' or 'the banality of evil' and a real attempt to respond to the unfinished thought trains that she starts in her various texts. In other words: to think with or against her, but to think, and not merely repeat the platitudes about the cold war and her supposed blindness to the importance of women or the economic sphere. There are gaps in her work, to be sure: but the task, surely, ought to be the Socratic one of dialogue, and of moving forward from where she left things. I have argued that a fruitful way of approaching what is crucial in her work is through the problem of judgment, as it raises a cluster of issues that remain quite pressing for political philosophy and critical theory and which centre on the question of political subjectivity in modernity. Failure to grasp this important aspect of Arendt's work usually means a failure to engage with her work in any satisfactory way, as we shall see. That said, there have been those who have engaged in an informed way with at least some of her ideas, including that of the question of political ontology. Nevertheless, she seems peculiarly 'homeless' or hard to place, turning up in margins and making unexpected appearances in debates where she might not have been explicitly considered.

Zizek

Slavoj Zizek has discussed Arendt's view of evil, the economic/political 'split', power/violence and has glanced at her use of the term 'totalitarianism' in a number of texts. His tone when discussing her is generally polemical, and he usually wants to distance himself from her positions, yet she never quite seems to come into focus in his work, while never quite disappearing from it. Indeed, in his latest work he has responded to some of her writing in an illuminating way.

In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (2001)⁴⁸⁸ Zizek begins by claiming that 'the elevation of Arendt is nothing less than a sign of the left's theoretical decline', as the term rather than being useful tends to block or replace thought. He may have a point: the afterlife of the term 'totalitarian' has not always been a happy one as it gets applied as a kind of label, standing as a kind of warning to all who would question liberal democracy: 'this is what you risk ending up with if you follow a radical political path'. After castigating some others for their unlikely sympathies with Arendt (Kristeva, Bernstein⁴⁸⁹) she all but disappears from the text – a text that is about totalitarianism. Here, perhaps, Arendt has suffered from seeming to be some kind of liberal thinker. However, it seems odd that the substance of her thinking in her long book on the subject is entirely bypassed.

In *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997)⁴⁹⁰ Zizek reads Arendt's thinking on the banality of evil as being correct as far as it goes, but significantly incomplete. The argument here is that 'banality of evil' corresponds to the Lacanian *symbolic* register (rules, bureaucracies

⁴⁸⁸ Zizek, 2001(a) pp. 2-3.

⁴⁸⁹ Zizek, 2001 (a) p. 2.

⁴⁹⁰ Zizek, 1997 p. 55.

and routines), but neglects the two other parts of the Lacanian triad – the *imaginary* and the *Real*. With the imaginary, we see the ‘imaginary screen of satisfaction’ (‘I must do this’) concealing the ‘real’ of perverse satisfactions in the way ‘unpleasant duty’ is employed to mask the obscene pleasures of persecution and murder. So the bureaucratic dimension is ambiguous: for some it is indeed a kind of neutralising or tranquillising factor, allowing the everyday perpetration of enormities, but for others it becomes ‘perverse ritual’. Žižek cites examples of excesses, which went far beyond the pen-pushing quality of an Eichmann, in support of this view that evil enormously exceeds the banal. For Žižek, the ‘banality of evil’ and ‘radical evil’ cannot be separated and Arendt’s account is thus hobbled by a pre theoretical and common sense view of sadism. The perpetrators were not Kantian formalists who were merely performing their duties for the regime; they were deriving perverse satisfactions from their roles as instruments of murder and humiliation. But even if one agrees with the kind of schema outlined here, it is possible to raise the question as to the *prevalence* of this kind of perversity, when we consider the political and social machinery of Nazi oppression. If the symbolic, imaginary and real all have a part to play in a consideration of the nature of evil, it seems at least possible that it is the first of these, embodied in the bureaucracy of Nazism, that captures Eichmann and the great majority who did the quotidian business of the Third Reich. Put another way: there were surely more Eichmanns than Mengeles in Nazi Germany, even minor Mengeles, deriving their nasty pleasures from the humiliation and oppression of others⁴⁹¹. But to make this point is perhaps to remain vulnerable that one is using a ‘common sense’ view of sadism. Whatever one’s view of this, if reflective judgment involves a kind of assumption of responsibility for one’s stance, Nazism involved the opposite: responsibility is shifted on to the Leader, History, and Nature etc. And there is

⁴⁹¹ See Peter Baehr’s discussion of this point in his ‘Banality and Cleverness’ in Berkowitz et. al., 2010: pp. 139-142. I don’t agree with his criticism of Arendt’s use of the ‘banality’ phrase but he shows the kind of close engagement with what Arendt actually wrote that is missing from Žižek’s brief discussion.

something in the idea that the functionaries of the machine used the ‘screen’ of duty, orders, etc., in order to rationalise their criminal activities. The question about evil, which we will leave open here, concerns which model best captures what happened in the Third Reich and after.

Zizek tends to endorse Arendt’s distinction between power and violence, at least up to a point. It may be remembered that, for Arendt, power as such arises from people acting together, whereas violence is the expression of naked coercion by those who have the weapons, but not the popular consent.⁴⁹² Zizek argues that the power/violence distinction has some validity, but does not go ‘all the way down’ as ultimately violence is the ‘underside’ of social power. But perhaps this is also Arendt’s point. The vision of a non-repressive popular republic might be ‘power’. As Wendy Brown argues, violence is the underside of unjust economic and social conditions. She adds ‘if Marxism had any analytical power for *political* theory, was it not in the insistence that the problem of freedom was contained in the social relations implicitly declared “unpolitical” –that is naturalised – in liberal discourse?’⁴⁹³ The radical position is that social conditions are the ‘reified expressions of ethical-political struggles’ and that the task is to unmask the pre-political violence in order to see it for what it is, *as* political.⁴⁹⁴ If the moral here is that politics is often most present when it seems to be absent, for instance in the social realm, then we seem to be reclaiming the apparently non political in order to see it in a new light. This might correspond to the model of politics as something that ‘appears’, becomes visible as a space of potential freedom even in the midst of ‘unpolitical’ social relations. The point here is that saying politics is a distinct thing does not mean that it is not implicated in its other, although the question remains as how to understand this.

⁴⁹² Arendt, 1973 p. 151, 1958, pp. 200-201.

⁴⁹³ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, cited by Zizek 2010, p. 389.

⁴⁹⁴ Zizek, 2007 (b) p. 218.

For Žižek, Arendt and Alain Badiou are at fault because, in Badiouian terms, truth is split from event. Arendt's 'abyss of freedom', in which the act initiates the unprecedented, corresponds somehow to Badiou's notion of an 'event'.⁴⁹⁵ For both of them, he argues, freedom is in the communal and political sphere, and this loses Marx's insight that freedom is in the 'unpolitical'. According to Žižek, Arendt's and Badiou's emphasis on the achievement of freedom in the communal political sphere risks losing Marx's insight that freedom lies in the apparently unpolitical quotidian zone. However, the 'event' of freedom can also be described as the transformative act that changes the coordinates of a situation, something Žižek elsewhere celebrates. Surely the best account would be one that emphasises the emergence, the *coming into actuality* of the political as it lies in the apparently non-political economic zones of oppression. On this account, the first kind of natality would be the coming-to-birth of the political *topos* itself, as radical disclosure and place of judgment. But how does this leap, if it is a leap, occur? Revolution is the classic example of the event that is supposed to effect this, but it seems unlikely that such a transformation could occur without a long Gramscian 'war of position'. The struggle to achieve a place in which the citizen may be disclosed through his/her free judgments and actions with others is the emergence of the political from the unpolitical social relations.

Žižek finds it all too easy to label Arendt as a 'liberal Heideggerian,' in love with the council system because she sees it as a recreation of the ancient *polis*.⁴⁹⁶ This is unfair. She is interested in the former because it is a phenomenon in which we see citizens acting politically together. She would surely have been as drawn to the event of the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 had she lived to see it. Again, we see Arendt herself rarely coming into

⁴⁹⁵ Žižek, 2001 (b) pp. 112-3.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 52 and 2008 p. 121.

focus in these discussions. She features in asides, or as one of the ‘usual suspects’ when it comes to a discussion of totalitarianism, liberalism or the cold war. But here we do see her being ranked, alongside Alain Badiou, ironically, someone Žizek actually has a great deal of common ground with, albeit here, of course, as someone sharing a mistaken line with him about political change as a kind of break or Event. Then why mention her at all? It is as if she features in a kind of return of the repressed – after all, anyone who has written so much and so influentially about political space, natality, judgment, evil and totalitarianism is hard to completely efface. And so she bobs up in the discussion like a symptom, and like a symptom she appears in part because Žizek is not engaging with her properly at any point. ‘Properly’ would mean an attempt to read what she actually said with some interpretative charity. An example of this is when Žizek notes her anti-bourgeois stance and concludes that this must be because she is a *conservative*, and not radical in any way.⁴⁹⁷ He cites with approval Robert Pippin’s claim that Arendt wants to ‘have it both ways’: she supports bourgeois norms and laws and the impetus to radical revolution.⁴⁹⁸ Again, this is hardly fair. When Arendt wrote most of her major work, it was in the wake of the Fascist and Stalinist challenge to liberal norms, as well as the abject failure, in many cases of the ‘liberal powers’ to live up to them. In this context, her commitment to *amor mundi*, to the rebuilding of a ‘house’ for humans to live in, of laws and democratic procedures as the way forwards, is not so surprising. Laws have real material effects, which is one of the reasons why ‘totalitarian’ regimes act so swiftly to undermine their independence from the party-state. As for bourgeois norms, Žizek himself in other contexts has argued for the importance of such norms – for the importance of *appearances* in supporting Obama’s opposition to extra judicial action against terror suspects, even if behind the appearances we know in reality that the norms are often breached. Indeed, his whole endorsement of Obama’s election had a strong

⁴⁹⁷ Žizek, 2009 p. 122.

⁴⁹⁸ Pippin, 2005 pp. 146-167.

element of support for the flawed ‘bourgeois’ norms over the actually present alternatives – such as the cynically direct endorsement of torture by Vice President Cheney during the Bush Presidency.

When Žizek turns briefly to a consideration of Agamben he has some astute comments to make about Arendt. Agamben reading Arendt notes that the historical fate of the ambiguity in the phrase ‘rights of man and citizen’ left those examples of unhoused, stateless, bare life, the people who needed the protection of rights, utterly stripped of all real protection.⁴⁹⁹ Without a ‘place,’ bounded by law and with real force to enforce those laws, these insulted and humiliated were defenceless. No state: no citizenship; no citizenship: no rights. In a discussion of Balibar and Agamben, Žizek considers the argument that ‘citizenship makes man’ and invokes Rancière’s argument that while the universality of rights may not be essential, the invocation of rights actually separates a community from itself, the rejected and excluded, in claiming their rights invoke a universality that the state with its pretensions to universality actually denies.⁵⁰⁰ To deny the ‘metapolitics’ of rights is to deny politics itself, which for Rancière is, like democracy, not a state but a kind of event or action that is disruptive of the way in which the state carves up reality. I shall try to explicate this claim of Rancière’s later, after considering Agamben’s use of Arendt.

Agamben

Agamben’s way of conceiving both the degradation of political subjectivity ‘inside’ the state together with the ‘outside’ of statelessness, homelessness and

⁴⁹⁹ See Arendt’s remarks on this in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1951 p 290 ff) and Agamben’s commentary in *Homo Sacer* (Agamben, 1978 pp. 126-34 *passim*).

⁵⁰⁰ See Žizek, 2006 p. 226. Rancière’s argument is considered below.

incarceration draws on Arendt, particularly in his book *Homo Sacer* (1995, English translation published 1998). Agamben comments that Arendt has given an account of the move of *animal laborans* to the centre of political modernity and he links this to Foucault's conception of 'bio-power'. Agamben comments that her discussion of the camps and of totalitarianism is not explicitly linked to what she later says about *animal laborans* in *The Human Condition*. This is an astute point, but as we have seen, the analytical narrative of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* clears the ground for what follows, and enables and necessitates the conceptual analysis of *The Human Condition*. Arendt is, again, no system builder. She opens up a line of thinking which then leads on to newer insights, at the cost, sometimes, of failing to making the kind of link Agamben is asserting here.

Agamben's thesis concerning the decline of the *bios* of humanity into the bare life of *zōē*, with its accompanying discussion of the crisis of the modern state, the obsession with the preservation/termination of life, rights and political categories is reminiscent of Arendtian and Foucauldian themes. Most striking, from my point of view, is the emergence of the 'consumer-subject': he or she who is administered, whose life is commodified in almost all its aspects, surveilled, analysed, mediated, measured, medicalised, commodified (and, if necessary, water boarded). A kind of Ballardian nightmare is revealed in which the enlightenment watchwords of 'liberty, equality, and fraternity' are displaced by 'security, pleasure and health' reminiscent of Nietzsche's 'Last Man'. Its paradigmatic space is the international airport, where one is (full body) scanned, checked, sold things and herded, where the two figures most in evidence are the salesperson and the security guard and where camera and tills track and record each step and every purchase.

Agamben notes that in chapter 5 of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt indicates that the crisis of the nation-state accompanies a crisis about status of rights.⁵⁰¹ With the loss of citizenship and of legally guaranteed rights and a place in the world the refugee puts the ‘originary fiction of modern society’ into a crisis. Neither the state nor global institutions like the League of Nations or the United Nations seem able to engage with the issue of the new unprotected, dehousing and radically vulnerable masses, impelled by political oppression or economic pressure to seek shelter. Unfortunately for them, the ‘Rights of Man’ are not found to apply to those for whom the phrase ‘...and citizen’ does not also apply. Agamben is surely on to something here: Arendt’s prescience applies not only to the increased pressure of migration in the early twenty-first Century but also to the larger story of the reduction of the political subject into bare or mere life and the waiving of ‘normal’ legal and constitutional safeguards in time of apparent peril. The link between politics, on the one hand, and the bare life exposed is the ‘state of exception’ that the sovereign power can effect. This is why the image of the camp is significant: for in the camp, as Arendt noted, everything is possible: it is a ‘zone of indistinction’ or stable zone or space of exception.⁵⁰² Agamben is echoing Arendt through his distinction between the conditions for a political subjectivity and the pressure of what he calls ‘bare life’. Agamben is refreshing in his willingness actually to read Arendt with an eye to what she can contribute to our understanding of political modernity. But we should not be too quick to assume a complete equivalence between the bare life of *Homo Sacer* and the cyclical life of *animal laborans*, and it is noteworthy that he has not (to this point) said much about any alternative possible politics. Nevertheless, any review of the two writers can see the obvious overlap in the accounts. The point I would emphasise from this is the importance of seeing Arendt not as the defender of liberal norms for their own sake,

⁵⁰¹ Agamben, 1978 p. 126.

⁵⁰² See Agamben, 1978 p. 170.

but as someone opening up the question of what it would be to have a political dimension in modernity.

One of the themes of this work has been to insist on the importance of the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* in Arendt's work: the *sensus communis*, the idea of plurality as the key to judgment, of the importance of *doxa* over *logos*. Politics, like aesthetics, does not seek the knowledge of the expert, yet must be responsive to the facts of history and place. In the political context in which Arendt places it, judgment is the plural practice that discloses a shared world of intersubjective meanings, delivering the citizen judge to freedom *through* politics rather than freedom from politics. However, we have also seen a problem with this model. The scenario Arendt inherited and adapted carried a notion of politics as a site of freedom, which nevertheless involves a double exclusion: of 'society' in the politics/society binary;⁵⁰³ and of the 'incompetent' in the competent/incompetent binary.

Both exclusions are really the same. The excluded are enormously varied, and they carry different names.⁵⁰⁴ However, they can be said to be under the same signifier of otherness. None of them qualify as proper subjects for membership of the political community. They are accordingly excluded from the *sensus communis*. The exclusion of the incompetent appears in Kant and reappears in Arendt's work, because of the way in which the philosopher, via an idea like 'taste' in *The Critique of Judgment*, continues the platonic attempt to determine who shall appear in what light in the republic of judges. It is on this important point that Jacques Ranciere makes some telling observations apropos Arendt and the political.

⁵⁰³ The Ancient Greek term *oikos* seems to comprehend the household, the economic and the ecological. All these areas, with their class and gender divisions seem to be excluded from the public realm of the political.

⁵⁰⁴ E.g.: slave/woman/peasant/proletarian/uncultivated/*homo laborans*/consumer/ochlos/mob/mass/rabble etc.

Ranciere

Ranciere engages with Arendt in a number of texts, never at great length but with creative force and polemical vigour. Not all his arguments are equally well founded or relevant to this discussion, but he does pick up the theme of the excluded from the political (from 'Taste' in the terms we have been using) and what he has to say is worth pondering. Ranciere's critique of the meaning of democracy and the political is especially relevant to our considerations. For Ranciere democracy is not a state, a regime of a system but a *scandal*, something that erupts. The urge to demarcate a zone of the political as distinct from other spheres is a kind of 'policing'. For Ranciere, Arendt is clearly in this tradition, and it is one of the reasons he is critical of her stance on politics. His polemic is sometimes rather loosely directed at an 'Arendt' that stands as a signifier for a tradition he wants to contest, rather than the real author of specific texts, but when we examine his more substantive points we are left with a serious challenge to the tradition that runs not just from Kant to Arendt, but, according to him, back to Plato. Considering what he has to say on this can help us reconsider the question of the 'place' of the political in the Twenty-First Century.

Hatred of Democracy (2006) is an example of his rather less well-considered polemic against Arendt. In it he lumps her together with those who would seek to separate the public political realm from democracy, as if democracy were itself the way in which the consumer society runs amok. This strain is in Arendt, but Ranciere hardly gives her a fair consideration. Admittedly she sometimes expresses herself in a mandarin way, but her concern at the way in which democratic and consumer preference have been conflated in

modern capitalist society is to the point and is not merely a bit of conservative, *de haut en bas* posturing. Even if we view the freedom/necessity and political/social distinctions as problematic, still capitalism isn't simply a particular field in which dumb consumers play. It is a dynamic, invasive and viral phenomenon that engulfs social reality and invests it with the coercive force of the 'free' market. But freedom is a caricature when it is reduced to consumer freedom, a kind of democracy of the credit card.⁵⁰⁵ While we may wish to revise Arendt's conception of the private, and wish to bring politics into that place where oppression is 'naturalised', we also need to think what a politics would have to be like to be different from what we have now. To challenge the 'inverted totalitarianism'⁵⁰⁶ of modern, managed consumer democracy is to challenge the logic of the market. With the historic defeat of the left, politics has been squeezed out, in a manner much less horrific than the methods of totalitarianism but with increasingly decisive results. And Ranciere is certainly wrong to argue, as he does, that Arendt's public/private distinction equates to the rule of experts and government oligarchies.⁵⁰⁷ Arendt's view, and it is one she makes in a number of places, is that experts should *not* be arbiters of the political world and that governmental and bureaucratic cliques which rule through the opacity of 'administrative methods' are a part of the problem, not the solution. The problem is that of finding a way of understanding politics as a *distinct* practice of freedom, while not severing it from the real world of social oppression and struggle.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁵ And this very much includes the virtual worlds of cyberspace. Any residual belief that the online world represents a new zone of political freedom, untouched by state or corporate authority is quite deluded. See *Blog Theory* by Jodi Dean for a thought-provoking account of the way in which online activism has arguably become an extension of the way in which the market connects with our drives: Dean, 2010.

⁵⁰⁶ See Wolin, 2008 *passim* for a discussion of this idea.

⁵⁰⁷ 'Ten Theses on Politics' in Ranciere, 2010 p. 28.

⁵⁰⁸ See Arendt, 1958, 1961/1968 for the general tenor of her thought on this issue and her essay on Lessing in *Men in Dark Times* *passim* for her explicit elevation of opinion over expert 'truth' (1968). As for the thought that she would desire the rule of bureaucrats over citizens, a cursory reading of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* should dispel that preposterous idea. Ranciere may mean to say that this would be the *unintended* effect of the political/social split, but he would need to provide an argument for this, and preferably some engagement with what Arendt actually says on the matter.

With this in mind, he is more helpful when he discusses and disputes the question of *who* should be a political subject in his *Dissensus* (2010). Here Ranciere identifies the impulse in political philosophy to demarcate a ‘purified’ political realm, a distinction between *praxis* and *poesis*. It is an impulse that recurs, especially in a time in which genuine politics seems to be eclipsed. On this reading, the call for a politics that would be separate from society is itself a kind of symptom, and is itself a kind of ‘policing’. After some mischaracterising of Arendt’s remarks he goes on, in my view, to make an extremely telling point on this head, one that speaks to the problem we have been discussing. This involves the question of *who* counts as a ‘political subject’ or bearer of rights. This is clearly germane to the question of who is a competent judge and thus admissible to the *Sensus Communis*.

Ranciere discusses an episode in the French revolution, that of the response of Olympe de Gouges and the other women who had been told that they had no political status. Her response was that if their necks were good enough for the guillotine, then they were good enough to take part in political action and debate. For Ranciere a significant point is made here: the women ‘had the rights that they did not have’⁵⁰⁹; they are *between* identities –between political subjectivity and bare life. Ranciere’s argument gains focus when he continues his thinking in the essay ‘Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?’(2010),⁵¹⁰ Ranciere connects the politics/necessity distinction to the question of rights. But he badly misunderstands the tone of Arendt’s remarks in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* about the plight of the landless and rightless refugees of the mid century:

The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion –formulas which were designed to solve

⁵⁰⁹ Ranciere, 2010, p. 57.

⁵¹⁰ In the collection *Dissensus*, (Ranciere, 2010 p. 63 ff).

problems *within* given communities –but that they no longer belonged to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed but that nobody wants even to oppress them [.....] The point is that a condition of complete rightlessness was created before the right to live was challenged.⁵¹¹

Ranciere asserts that Arendt's statement 'nobody wants to oppress them' has a 'plainly contemptuous tone'.⁵¹² But Arendt's point was surely not to show contempt for the refugee, but rather to express in an ironic way the manner in which these people had been deprived even of the status of oppressed (political) subjects. This is not the first time Arendt's irony has been misunderstood; not the first in which an earnest reader has leapt too quickly to a conclusion about what she is actually saying, what she means. In fact, her tone is much more plausibly understood as an expression of outrage at the way an entire class of people lost even the right to be oppressed, as she put it. After all, she had come close to being one of them herself.⁵¹³

Ranciere's really effective point comes when he goes on to question Agamben's conception of the camp as the 'Nomos of Modernity'. In Agamben's account, informed *inter alia* by a reading of Arendt, Schmitt and Foucault, sovereign power has the potential to declare 'states of exception' which strip some individuals of their status as citizens, as political subjects, (*bios*) and reduces them to *Homo Sacer*, the one that can be killed, abandoned *by* and *to* the law in its aspect as *lex talonis*. Agamben, like Foucault, sees the universality of power in modern societies leading to the concentration camp as the image of the age.⁵¹⁴ The readiness of the western powers to resort to 'extraordinary rendition', special powers and off-shore detention camps seems to support this, as perhaps in a less

⁵¹¹ Arendt, 1951/2004 pp. 295-6.

⁵¹² Ranciere, 2010 p. 64.

⁵¹³ C.f. Chapter 1 of the present work, for a brief account of her flight from the Nazis.

⁵¹⁴ Not here used in Arendt's sense.

lurid way, does the reduction of the citizen to consumer/suspect in the surveillance society, in which the mall and the airport departure area seem emblematic, with their techniques of advanced consumption, array of scanners and security men. In this context the extinction of the political subject and her replacement with *homo laborans* seems inevitable. But the very completeness of this picture of abjection raises objections. If we conclude from our scepticism about universal human rights that rights are whatever the state ‘embraces’ us with, then this means we are in deep trouble, for the state and its power seem intent on erasing all trace of the political. So we can see Ranciere’s point that the claim of the ‘party of no part’, the rejected and excluded of the state, is itself a *political* act, showing the fault line that runs *through* the political community, not between it and some ‘outside’ composed of the stateless and unrecognised. Nonetheless, even if we concede the force of this point, we may still maintain that a divided community, marked by dissensus, is one in which the goal of a true *sensus communis* is still significant. It would be an aspiration for a free political community that remains deferred. After all, what is the claim of the oppressed and excluded? It is to take their place as equal political subjects, and in making that claim real the politics emerges, whatever the context of economic exploitation. Indeed the matter of politics must include the overthrow of such exploitation. The claim to have rights and to be a political subject is of course a political one. Politics is thus the means *and* the end, the aspiration to a human world without oppression, a *topos* of freedom.

Ranciere indicts Agamben and Arendt: they ‘depopulate the political stage’, replacing it with state power or bare life.⁵¹⁵ Rights become either tautological or a void (one either has the rights one’s state says one has or one has nothing at all). Ranciere is concerned with the rights of those who have no rights; for him, the claim that one has

⁵¹⁵ Ranciere, 2010 p. 66.

rights is one that divides a political community. The demand for them is a political struggle by the excluded. So Ranciere's problem with Arendt *et al* is that they have decided *in advance* who is the 'subject of rights'. But rights are not allocated, Ranciere claims, they are a kind of *inscription*⁵¹⁶ in a context of dissensus; politics is a process, or an event – not a sphere. This issue of the excluded should by now be familiar: it is the problem, traceable to Kant, which is carried forward by Arendt.⁵¹⁷ Ranciere sees that aesthetics is at the heart of politics, and he is aware, unlike Lyotard, that this is not a question of the Sublime. It is about how the world is divided and what/who appears in it. So Ranciere is surely right to remind us that the *demos* is characterised by those excluded elements not part of the 'properly conceived republic'. Ranciere's name for the excluded is *ochlos*.⁵¹⁸ It is their claim to be political subjects that *creates* the political moment.

What is the nature of the political moment or event? Here again we need to return to the question of judgment. To recall: reflective judgment requires a freedom from categories, laws and rules, it is 'open', unsupported but radically plural. Arendt's sense of politics is that it must be responsive to fact, to history and situation, yet uncoerced and free. It is in this open zone that we see the possibility that free individuals may grasp a common world. This plural disclosure of individuals is at the core of what we mean by the political. Contra nihilism, it needs not be the property of an elite; it is the promise of an alternative to the atomised mass society of (post) modernity. This is the political existentialism that assumes that one exists, judges and acts with others: in the light of the public, all things appear (*pave* Heidegger). In order to bring the unprecedented into the world and to be serious about politics one must grasp that this public realm with its *beteroglossia* and clashing opinion is the place in which meaning and reality chiefly

⁵¹⁶ Ibid. p. 68.

⁵¹⁷ Ranciere claims that it goes back as far as Plato.

⁵¹⁸ The *ochlos* is not simply an equivalent for the other terms we have used to mark the presence of an excluded or unconsidered other, but it does join the chain of relevant terms.

reside. Arendt needs some revision, because the political tradition she belongs to carries with it the problems of exclusion and repression that she inherits. Most notably, we need to challenge the conception of a political space that thinks it needs to distinguish between proper and improper subjects.

If we think of judgment ‘topologically’ in Kant’s and Arendt’s terms we may imagine a plurality of judging political subjects, who together both constitute and share a given world of inter-est, of that which lies between them. This is the political ‘space’ of *doxa*, of opinion in which judges disclose themselves through their judgments to the others, judgments which are non-coercive but also non-trivial.⁵¹⁹ It is ‘bordered’ by laws, constitutions, bills or rights etc: a symbolic dimension that also has real material effects on the actor/judges. This ‘wall’ is a human creation, the precipitate of previous reflective judgments, which now provides the rules for future determinate judgments. Laws are thus *congealed judgments*. Understood in this ‘enlightened’ way they appear as fallible, provisional and revisable creations of previous human subjects and not of gods or Immortal Legislators.

This is the space of freedom for Arendt, the setting for a true *sensus communis*, and it is this ‘space’ of free appearance that I am suggesting is the aim and setting of political struggle – a fully achieved and non exclusive realm of judgment being ultimately the *aim* of efforts of emancipation. Reflective judgment that knows itself as such occurs when and if the judges nerve themselves to act autonomously, and with an acceptance of responsibility for the judgments they make, both the world they are in and the future one they are making through judgment and action. One is between past and future. In

⁵¹⁹ Always remembering that this disclosure is not of some pre-existing essence or core self, but rather something like the mask or *geste*. On this point see Villa, ‘Modernity, Alienation and Critique’ in Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001. The presentation of a public self is also *constitutive* of that self – the self as public mask.

Arendt's schema one first *thinks* for oneself in order to grasp the meaning of things, then *judgets* and *acts* with others. Actions bring in the new, and their true meaning is revealed when considered after the event by the thinking/judging spectator-judges.

But the picture has to be complicated when we look at the image of the political space in the real world of inequality and exploitation, i.e. the one we live in now. Even if such a space were to be opened in the manner described above it is haunted by its exclusions. On one side are the judges; on the other the common sense of the ordinary person, the rabble, the *ochlos* or (as in *On Revolution*) the passive and consumerist *homme moyen sensuel*. A radical enlightenment, a project that would emancipate the all and not the few needs to recognise and confront this split in the imagined community, a split that can also be named as 'class'. The liberal stance following Mill and Kant has tended to extend suffrage or equal consideration by stages *to* the deserving other. The more radical approach is to start from the fracture that itself defines the social field, from the antagonisms and dissensus that characterise political space, and in which the other claims *for herself* the right to equal respect as a political subject. The usual move at this point is to argue that since a fully inclusive political space is impossible without action to eradicate exploitation and exclusion in social and economic life, Arendt's picture of a free political space must be just her characteristically (liberal) illusion.

That would be a mistake. Arendt's emphasis on the overriding importance of a politics that is not simply conflated with the social is important. The judgment at the heart of politics requires an existential avowal of responsibility, a clear-sighted acceptance of what one is doing. But modernity presents a multitude of ways in which human freedom can be sloughed off, onto History, Nature, *Logos*, or Leader. Each can be the alibi or screen that the individual employs to justify his action or inaction. And this is true

not only for the functionary acting under dictatorship, but may be regarded as the mark of liberal societies – only here the Master Signifier of the Market tends to substitute for the others. In the market-dominated world, the one great issue seems to be that of subjective choice, with the state as just one of the allocators and regulators of resources. As Carl Schmitt remarked, the tendency of liberalism is to ‘tie the political to the ethical and subjugate it to economics.’⁵²⁰ A certain kind of ethics flourishes here, among groups and individuals vying for recognition as victims perhaps, or through the vastly increased interest in the beginning and ends of life in medical ethics for instance.⁵²¹ What gets eliminated is any sense of the political as the core way of living a free life with other citizens in a way that would not be structured by the efficient distribution of material resources, let alone any challenge to the primacy of the market and all that goes with it, the assumption of the goal of perpetual economic growth as the essential precondition of the Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number. The main threat to freedom thus conceived is *economic*, the logic of the capitalist production-consumption of *animal laborans* and his hidden persuaders. It is thus correct to say that the existing economic and social conditions are a naturalisation of the effects of power and oppression; the political struggle might be to expose their contingency and open up such arrangements to political contestation. The existential character of true autonomy is the radical dream of a future that makes good on the promise of freedom embodied in the enlightenment and liberal projects. The zone of freedom is a space that is yet to come, and the task is to expose the contingency of oppressive arrangements and to politicise them. Politics cannot be *another* field, or even a kind of palimpsest through which other, lower, forms of life are glimpsed; nor is it a logic existing alongside other equally valid but entirely unconnected practices. If it were it would resemble a form without content. So what is the content of politics? It is the speech, judgments and actions that coalesce around the project of emancipation;

⁵²⁰ Schmitt, 2007, p. 61.

⁵²¹ See Wendy Brown, 1996 *passim*.

that which would genuinely put the logic of the free political subject above that of the market. This is the authentically radical promise of the enlightenment: that the citizen be the conscious judge and actor, not the plaything of blind ‘economic imperatives’. The Good Place needs to be about more than the efficient allocation of resources, which is why the Marxist project, properly understood, is not the extension of the logic of labour to all human life. Arendt’s critique of this view was accurate because it was the one held by most Marxists and non-Marxists in the 1950s and 1960s. But as Moshe Postone has revealed, it is not at all at the heart of Marx’s conception of history and social change.⁵²² The emancipatory struggle is one to clear the space of freedom in the midst of unfreedom. We might imagine of the political project of the radical in yet another way: draining a swamp, in the manner of Freud’s (and Lacan’s): ‘Wo es war, soll ich werden’.

Having said that, it is vital to think again about the economic/political distinction in a more complex way than Arendt was wont to do. While it is essential to move beyond the crude economism or ‘labourism’ of a certain kind of outmoded ‘leftist’ thought, it remains necessary to keep the economic and social underpinning of any political dissensus firmly in mind. For if we do not, political affiliations will begin to look under-motivated, even arbitrary. The decision to be liberal, conservative, radical or whatever becomes merely a matter of political stance or pose, not something involved in the deeper struggles to create a fully emancipated society for all the people. Here we may also criticise Rancière, as he seems to be inclined to understand political struggle in a way that is unconnected to the place of social agents in a capitalist society. Political struggle is the way in which oppression in the social sphere is articulated; the political is *emergent*: it develops through and out of struggle. Any dissent or conflict in any area of life can promise to become political, since politics is the direction in which struggle takes people

⁵²² See Postone, 1996 *passim*. One could almost say that Arendt turns out to have been closer to Marx on this point than many ‘Marxists’: one of Postone’s key points is that for Marx labour-time is *not* the a-historical source of all value.

—away from being functionaries, servants or mere means, and towards recognition between equals in an inclusive *sensus communis*. Again, *pace* Rancière, it also involves the shared taking of responsibility for the world; politics involves revolt, but cannot stop at the moment of dislocation of an existing oppressive order. Politics is judging the kind of world we want to be in together, and then taking responsibility for its future: *amor mundi*. If we consider it in this way we can say that the political is a promise, something that has never been entirely achieved. It is a unique and deeply significant way of interacting with others, and the *means* by which it is achieved becomes the *thing* achieved. It is also riven by dissent.

Here we must recognise the embarrassment of there being two kinds of person on the scene: the judges with Taste and the ones who have merely common human understanding. But is the ‘tasteful’ who should blush. To insist that one is a judge too, despite one’s ‘lack of qualification’, is not to ask for admittance to ‘taste’ or the *sensus communis*: it is rather to threaten the overthrow of a regime defined by its exclusions. Politics is dissent. It is the split between the supposedly enlightened —the ‘proper’ —and the improper others. There is a kind of practical demand for the utopia of recognition, which is always signalled when the excluded demand the overthrow of the coordinates of the present system. The plurality of free judges is an image of freedom.

Here we have a rudimentary ontology of the political in Kant-Arendt: the political thing is the thing that is by its nature plural and disclosive. Other types of human interaction involve others; this one has the special characteristic of revealing each to each and directing attention to the way in which humans can freely make something new. And as Hannah Arendt saw, it is judgment that is the central activity here, since the thinking that precedes it has some quality of withdrawal from the world, and the activity that

follows judgment is founded on the recognition of the many others at the core of reflective judgment. Or to put it another way, it is to think beyond the instrumental reason of the here and now; to make reflective judgments in a context formed by past judgments; to act; to make revolutions. The political space in which each judge or actor discloses his or herself to the others in free but contested judgment is the space of freedom. But it is not a space the limits or the membership of which anyone can prescribe in advance. Each struggle enacts this free interaction, albeit in a partial and imperfect manner; the goal is the free society in which none are excluded.

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