

After Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, and the
Realization and Defeat of the Western Tradition

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, parents, and my wife, Emily Sahakian.

Abstract

This dissertation explores Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Isaiah Berlin's (1909-1997) understanding of the Western tradition of political philosophy in the light of totalitarianism in their works of the late 1940s and 1950s. The total collapse of traditional political relations and regimes in the 1930s and 1940s put the entire discipline and tradition of political philosophy in question. As Arendt and Berlin reflected on the Western tradition of political philosophy, both decided that the tradition was not just defeated by Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, it was also in a sense realized in those regimes. In exploring their ambivalent attitude toward the tradition, this dissertation aims to illuminate how Arendt and Berlin contributed to the postwar imperative to think afresh about the Western tradition of political philosophy not only to expose its originating flaws, but also to reconstruct political philosophy on decidedly anti-totalitarian premises. This dissertation engages Arendt and Berlin with respect to the topics of totalitarianism, the tradition of political philosophy, the significance of Machiavelli for post-totalitarian political theory, human plurality as a mode of engaging politics, modern world alienation or agoraphobia and the midcentury zeitgeist of social adjustment. When read together—which political theorists as a rule almost never do—these topics emerge as important to the development of Arendt and Berlin's respective bodies of anti-totalitarian and “pluralist” political thought. What is ultimately at stake for them in seeking to understand the complicated relationship between totalitarianism and the Western tradition of political philosophy is how to proceed in political theory in a fully post-totalitarian way. In addition to bringing Arendt and Berlin together and investigating some important thematic similarities between them, my dissertation advances our knowledge of both

thinkers by revealing how deeply the concepts and issues of politics, pluralism, totalitarianism and the Western tradition of political philosophy are intertwined in their writings. Beyond Arendt and Berlin studies, this dissertation contributes to our knowledge of the endeavor to renovate or create political theory after totalitarianism and during the Cold War.

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Abbreviations

Works by Hannah Arendt listed in chronological order.

- NF* “Nightmare and Flight” [1945], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 133-135.
- GP* “Approaches to the ‘German Problem’” [1945], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 106-120.
- Existenz* “What Is Existenz Philosophy?,” *Partisan Review* 13 (1946), pp. 34-56.
- FE* “French Existentialism” [1946], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 188-193.
- DKJ* “Dedication to Karl Jaspers” [1947], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 212-216.
- Burden* *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. First Edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951.
- Quest* “The Spiritual Quest of Modern Man: The Answer of the Existentialists.” Lecture, New School for Social Research, New York, N.Y., 1952. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- MT* “Mankind and Terror” [1953], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 297-306.
- FHM* “From Hegel to Marx” [1953], in *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, pp. 70-80.
- RP* “Religion and Politics” [1953], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 368-390.
- EC* “The Ex-Communists” [1953], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 391-400.
- UC* “Understanding Communism” [1953], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 363-367.
- Reply* “A Reply to Eric Voegelin” [1953], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 401-408.
- NewSchool* “The Great Tradition and the Nature of Totalitarianism” [1953]. Notes for six lectures, New School for Social Research, New York, NY, March 18 to April 22, 1953. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- UP* “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)” [1953], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 307-327. This essay was the first of six lectures Arendt gave at the New School in the Spring of 1953, and then published in *Partisan Review* 20:4 (July-Aug. 1953), pp. 377-392.
- NT* “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding” [1953], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 328-360. This essay comprises lectures 2-4 of the six lectures Arendt gave at the New School in the Spring of 1953.

- IT* “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” *The Review of Politics* 15:3 (July 1953), pp. 303-327.
- Preface* “Preface” [1953] to the Christian Gauss Seminar in Criticism lectures at Princeton. Second Draft. Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., Oct. 8 to Nov. 12, 1953. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- TMA* “Tradition and the Modern Age” [1953], in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1968, pp. 17-40. Originally the first of six lectures Arendt delivered as the Christian Gauss Seminar lecturer at Princeton in 1953 and then published in *Partisan Review* 21:1 (Jan.-Feb. 1954), pp. 53-75.
- TET* “The End of Tradition” [1953], in *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, pp. 81-92. This essay derives from *KMPT*.
- TPT* “The Tradition of Political Thought” [1953], in *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, pp. 40-62.
- GT1* “The Great Tradition: I. Law and Power” [1953], *Social Research* 74:3 (Fall 2007), pp. 713-726.
- GT2* “The Great Tradition: II. Ruling and Being Ruled” [1953], *Social Research* 74:4 (Winter 2007), pp. 941-954.
- KMPT* “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought” [1953], *Social Research* 69:2 (Summer 2002), pp. 273-319. This material is drawn from lectures 3-5 of Arendt’s six Christian Gauss Seminar lectures at Princeton.
- CP* “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought” [1954], in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, pp. 428-447.
- PP* “Philosophy and Politics” [1954], *Social Research* 57:1 (Spring 1990), pp. 73-103.
- Socrates* “Socrates” [1954], in *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, pp. 5-39. This is a slightly different version of *PP*.
- Machiavelli* “History of Political Theory” [1955] course, University of California, Berkeley, CA. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- Milan* “The Rise and Development of Totalitarianism and Authoritarian Forms of Government in the Twentieth Century” [1955], in *The Future of Freedom*. The Congress for Cultural Freedom. Bombay, Usha, 1955, pp. 180-206.
- Broch* “Hermann Broch: 1886-1951” [1955], trans. Richard Winston. In *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harvest, 1968, pp. 111-151.
- Epilogue* “Epilogue” [1955], in *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, pp. 201-204.
- Authority* “What Is Authority?” [1957], in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1968, pp. 91-141.

- Jaspers* “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World?” [1957], trans. Clara and Richard Winston. In *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harvest, 1968, pp. 81-94.
- IIP* “Introduction into Politics” [1956-59], in *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, pp. 93-200.
- HC* *The Human Condition* [1958]. Second Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- History* “The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern” [1958], in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1968, pp. 41-90.
- Lessing* “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts About Lessing” [1959], trans. Clara and Richard Winston. In *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harvest, 1968, pp. 3-32.
- CC* “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance” [1960], in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1968, pp. 197-226.
- GBPF* “Preface: The Gap Between Past and Future” [1960-61], in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1968, pp. 3-15.
- WF* “What Is Freedom?” [1961], in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1968, pp. 143-171.
- Wesleyan* “Machiavelli” [1961] course, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- Fathers* “Founding Fathers” [1963], lecture delivered at the University of Chicago. Edited, Translated and Footnoted by Ursula Ludz based on the copy available at the Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
<<http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/294/421>>
- Chicago* “Introduction Into Politics” [1963] course, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- Gaus* “‘What Remains? The Language Remains’: A Conversation with Günter Gaus” [1964], in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. Edited by Peter Baehr. New York: Penguin, 2000, pp. 3-22.
- PRUD* “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship” [1964], in *Responsibility and Judgment*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2003, pp. 17-48.
- Cornell* “From Machiavelli to Marx” [1965] course, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- SQMP* “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” [1965-66], in *Responsibility and Judgment*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2003, pp. 49-146.
- OT* *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [1966]. New addition with added prefaces. New York: Harvest, 1994.

- Brecht* “Bertolt Brecht: 1898-1956” [1966], in *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harvest, 1968, pp. 207-250.
- WPJ* “What is Permitted to Jove...: Reflections on the Poet Bertolt Brecht and His Relation to Politics” [1966], in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*. Edited by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 223-256.
- Truth* “Truth and Politics” [1967], in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin, 1968, pp. 227-64.
- Benjamin* “Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940” [1968], trans. Harry Zohn. In *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harvest, 1968, pp. 153-206.
- CR* “Collective Responsibility” [1968], in *Responsibility and Judgment*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2003, pp. 147-158.
- WIPP* “Philosophy and Politics: What is Political Philosophy?” [1969] course, New School for Social Research, New York, NY. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- OV* *On Violence*. New York: Harvest, 1970.
- CD* “Civil Disobedience” [1970], in *Crisis of the Republic*. New York: Harvest, 1972, pp. 49-102.
- LKPP* *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* [1970]. Edited by Ronald Beiner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- TMC* “Thinking and Moral Considerations” [1971], in *Responsibility and Judgment*. Edited by J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2003, pp. 159-189.
- Heidegger* “Martin Heidegger at Eighty” [1971], in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy: Critical Essays*. Edited by Michael Murray. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978, pp. 293-303.
- Thinking* *The Life of the Mind*. Vol. 1: *Thinking* [1971]. One-volume Edition. New York: Harcourt, 1978.
- Willing* *The Life of the Mind*. Vol. 2: *Willing* [1971]. One-volume Edition. New York: Harcourt, 1978.
- Toronto* “On Hannah Arendt” [1972], in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*. Edited by Melvyn A. Hill. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979, pp. 301-339.
- Virginia* Remarks Prepared for the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the American Society of Christian Ethics, Richmond, VA, January 21, 1973. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
- Princeton* Remarks Prepared for the Advisory Council, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J., September 21, 1973. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- HAKJ* *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*. Edited by Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner. Translated by Robert and Rita Kimber. New York: Harcourt, 1992.
- DI* *Denktagebuch, 1950-1973*. Vol. 1, edited by Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann. Germany: Piper, 2002.

- D2* *Denktagebuch, 1950-1973*. Vol. 2, edited by Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann. Germany: Piper, 2002.
- JW* *The Jewish Writings*. Edited by J. Kohn and Ron H. Feldman. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.

Works by Isaiah Berlin listed in chronological order.

- Blok* “Editorial: II. Alexander Blok,” *Oxford Outlook* 11:55 (June 1931), pp. 75-76. Emory University Archives, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
- KM* *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* [1939, rev. 1948, 1963, 1978, 2013]. Fourth Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- DCI* “Democracy, Communism and the Individual” [1949], in *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*. Edited by H. Hardy.
<<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/demcomind.pdf>>, pp. 1-6.
- ILAU* “The Intellectual Life of American Universities” [1949], in *Enlightening: Letters 1946-1960*. Edited by H. Hardy and Jennifer Holmes, with the assistance of Serena Moore. London: Chatto & Windus, 2009, pp. 749-760.
- TEC* “Three Essays on Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century, 1949-1951” [1950-1952], in *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*. Edited by H. Hardy.
<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/singles/culture.docx>, pp. 1-63.
- PITC* “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” *Foreign Affairs* 28:3 (April 1950), pp. 351-385.
- SST* “Socialism and Socialist Theories” [1950, rev. 1966], in *The Sense of Reality*. Edited by H. Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, pp. 77-115.
- PIRA* *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age* [1950-52]. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Tolstoy* *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History* [1951, rev. 1953]. New York: Touchstone, 1986.
- JSAE* “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation” [1951], in *The Power of Ideas*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 162-185.
- FIB* *Freedom and Its Betrayal* [1952]. Second Edition. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- HI* *Historical Inevitability* [1953]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954. Auguste Comte Memorial Trust Lecture, May 12, 1953.
- SR* “The Sense of Reality” [1953], in *The Sense of Reality*. Edited by H. Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, pp. 1-39.
- PGR* “Philosophy and Government Repression” [1954], in *The Sense of Reality*. Edited by H. Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, pp. 54-76.

- PB* "Philosophy and Beliefs," *The Twentieth Century* (June 1955), pp. 495-521.
- HBIL* "Herzen and Bakunin on Individual Liberty" [1955], in *Russian Thinkers*. Second Edition. Edited by H. Hardy and Aileen Kelly. New York: Penguin, 2008, pp. 93-129.
- M* "Montesquieu" [1955], in *Against the Current*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 130-61.
- PE* "The Philosophers of the Enlightenment" [1956], in *The Power of Ideas*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 36-52.
- RWF* "A Revolutionary without Fanaticism" [1956, rev. 1979], in *The Power of Ideas*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 88-102.
- PJ* "Political Judgment" [1957], in *The Sense of Reality*. Edited by H. Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, pp. 40-53.
- VHH* *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* [1957-58; 1964]. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- TCL* *Two Concepts of Liberty* [1958]. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959. Inaugural Lecture, Oxford University, October 31, 1958.
- EUV* "European Unity and Its Vicissitudes" [1959], in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. Edited by H. Hardy. London: John Murray, 1990, pp. 175-206.
- JSM* *John Stuart Mill and The Ends of Life*. London, 1959. The Robert Waley Cohen Memorial Lecture, 1959.
- Artistic* "Artistic Commitment: A Russian Legacy" [1960s], in *The Sense of Reality*. Edited by H. Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, pp. 194-231.
- CSH* "History and Theory: The Concept of Scientific History," *History and Theory* 1:1 (1960), pp. 1-31.
- TRR* "The Romantic Revolution: A Crisis in the History of Modern Thought" [1960], in *The Sense of Reality*. Edited by H. Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, pp. 168-193.
- TE* "Tolstoy and Enlightenment" [1960], in *Russian Thinkers*. Second Edition. Edited by H. Hardy and Aileen Kelly. New York: Penguin, 2008, pp. 273-298.
- JMOF* "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism" [1960], in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. Edited by H. Hardy. London: John Murray, 1990, pp. 91-174.
- BGI* "The Birth of Greek Individualism" [1960-62], in *Liberty*. Edited by H. Hardy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 287-321.
- PT* "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" [1962], in *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Second Series). Edited by Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967, pp. 1-33.
- TPP* "The Purpose of Philosophy" [1962], in *The Power of Ideas*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 24-35.

- MINC* “Marxism and the International in the Nineteenth Century” [1964], in *The Sense of Reality*. Edited by H. Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, pp. 116-167.
- HLPM* “Hobbes, Locke and Professor MacPherson,” *The Political Quarterly* 35:4 (Oct.-Dec. 1964), pp. 444-468.
- RR* *The Roots of Romanticism* [1965]. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- EER* “The Essence of European Romanticism” [1966], in *The Power of Ideas*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 200-204.
- HSR* “The Hazards of Social Revolution” [1966], in *The Environment of Change*. Edited by Aaron W. Warner, Dean Morse and Thomas M. Cooney. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, pp. 1-27.
- LAW* Isaiah Berlin Letters to Andrzej Walicki 1962-1966, in Andrzej Walicki, *Encounters with Isaiah Berlin: Story of an Intellectual Friendship*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 55-166.
- TCE* “The Counter-Enlightenment” [1968], in *Against the Current*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 1-24.
- Turgenev* “Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament” [1970], in Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds. New York: Penguin, 1975, pp. 7-58.
- Kant* “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Nationalism” [1972], in *The Sense of Reality*. Edited by H. Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, pp. 232-248.
- NM* “The Originality of Machiavelli” [1972], in *Against the Current*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 25-79.
- MH* “Meinecke and Historicism” [1972], in *The Power of Ideas*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 205-213.
- CWJM* Interview with Isaiah Berlin by John Merson, 1974. ABC Radio National, Australia.
<<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/a-conversation-with-isaiah-berlin/3141828>>
- GS* “Georges Sorel” [1974], in *Against the Current*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 296-332.
- IPHP* “Is A Philosophy of History Possible?” [1974], in *Philosophy of History and Action*. Edited by Yirmiahu Yovel. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1978, pp. 219-225.
- ARW* “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World” [1975], in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. Edited by H. Hardy. London: John Murray, 1990, pp. 207-237.
- IWPJ* “Politics.” Interview with Peter Jay, 1975. In *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*. Edited by H. Hardy.
<<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/polijay.pdf>>, pp. 1-26.
- EIPS* “The End of the Ideal of the Perfect Society” [1975], in *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*. Edited by H. Hardy. Accessed September 15, 2013. <no

- longer available online>. Published in Spanish and English in *Isaiah Berlin: utopía, tragedia y pluralismo*, ed. Jorge Geraldo Ramí. Medellín, 2010.
- NPNPP* “Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power” [1979], in *Against the Current*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 333-356.
- MWRW* “Meetings with Russian Writers in 1945 and 1956” [1980], in *Personal Impressions*. Third Edition. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 356-432.
- IWEK* Enrique Krauze, “An Interview with Isaiah Berlin,” *Partisan Review* 50:1 (1983), pp. 7-28.
- POI* “The Pursuit of the Ideal” [1988], in *The Proper Study of Mankind*. Edited by H. Hardy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998, pp. 1-16.
- Conversations* Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin* [1991]. New Edition. London: Halban, 1999.
- IWNG* “Return of the Volksgeist: Nationalism, Good and Bad” [1991], in *At Century’s End: Great Minds Reflect on Our Times*. Edited by Nathan P. Gardels. LaJolla, CA: ALTI, 1995, pp. 84-98.
- Death* “Sir Isaiah Berlin” [1996], in *Death: Breaking the Taboo*. Interviews by Anna Howard. Evesham: Arthur James, 1996, pp. 30-37.
- MIP* “My Intellectual Path” [1998], in *The Power of Ideas*. Edited by H. Hardy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, pp. 1-23.
- CWSL* “Isaiah Berlin in Conversation with Steven Lukes,” *Salmagundi* 120 (Fall 1998), pp. 52-134.
- SM* *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture Under Communism*. Edited by H. Hardy. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004.
- Flourishing* *Letters 1928-1946*. Edited by H. Hardy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Enlightening* *Enlightening: Letters 1946-1960*. Edited by H. Hardy and Jennifer Holmes, with the assistance of Serena Moore. London: Chatto & Windus, 2009.
- Building* *Building: Letters 1960-1975*. Edited by H. Hardy and Mark Pottle. London: Chatto & Windus, 2013.
- Dialogue* *Unfinished Dialogue: Isaiah Berlin and Beata Polanowska-Sygulska*. Foreword by H. Hardy. New York: Prometheus Books, 2006.

INTRODUCTION

*“I think it is a secret for nobody
that our attitude to the past and to our tradition
has been greatly compromised in this century.”*

—Hannah Arendt¹

In the introduction to the publication of a series of radio talks on the Western tradition given by the BBC in the late 1940s, Lord Layton identified the main impulse for them as “the fear that Western civilization itself, and the moral standards and human relationships that have grown up with it, are in mortal danger. Ever since the first world war the challenge—both in theory and practice—to the basic principles underlying what this book calls *The Western Tradition* has grown in violence.”² The talks themselves covered a range of topics related to the Western tradition, including Christianity, science, the scientific method, the Western political tradition, the rights of the individual, liberty and democracy, totalitarianism, nationalism, class warfare, Communism, skepticism and tolerance, and Roman Catholic and Protestant views of church and state. Lord Layton concluded his introduction with the hope that the book might help us “search our heart and mind afresh” and decide what we believe about what makes life most worth living and why.³

Born in the first decade of the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) both reached maturity as Hitler was rising to power and after the Second World War they thought that the principles of the Western tradition had collapsed in the face of the reality of totalitarianism in Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s

¹ Arendt, “The Archimedean Point,” *Ingenor* (Spring 1969), p. 5.

² Lord Layton, “Introduction” to *The Western Tradition* (London: Vox Mundi, 1951), p. 7.

³ Lord Layton, “Introduction,” p. 9.

Russia. In the Preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt wrote that the “dignity” of the Western tradition had been “usurped” by the “subterranean stream of Western history.”⁴ As she emphasized a few years later, it was not the “idea” of totalitarianism that destroyed the tradition but its very “actions” that “have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment.”⁵ Berlin thought Hitler and Stalin’s crimes proved that the “banisters” of thought upon which the Hegelians, Marxists, and other nineteenth-century “system-builders” had built their philosophies of history could not withstand the determined assaults of those “who wish to change human beings by playing on irrational impulses and defying the framework of civilized life according to some arbitrary pattern of their own.”⁶ More importantly, Berlin thought Hitler and Stalin’s unprecedented crimes were “violent aberrations” from “the habits, traditions, above all the common notions of good and evil, which reunite us to our Greek and Hebrew and Christian and humanist past.”⁷ Millions of Jews were murdered, Berlin believed, because totalitarianism had denied the core notion of Western civilization, the premise of “common humanity.”⁸

In the late 1940s and 1950s, when it seemed, in Arendt’s favorite quotation from Tocqueville, that “the past has ceased to throw its light onto the future, and the mind of man wanders in darkness,”⁹ and that there were no longer reliable “banisters” to connect Western Europe to its past and to point a path to the future, Arendt and Berlin in effect

⁴ Arendt, *Burden*, p. ix.

⁵ Arendt, *UP*, pp. 309-310. See also *Reply* and *SQMP*, p. 52.

⁶ Berlin, *SR*, p. 11. See also *Conversations*, p. 21.

⁷ Berlin, *EUV*, p. 205.

⁸ Berlin, *EUV*, p. 179. For a recent statement of this view, see Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, “How Auschwitz is Misunderstood,” *The New York Times*, January 25, 2015, p. SR3.

⁹ Arendt, *Toronto*, p. 337. See also Arendt, *UP*, p. 309.

took up Lord Layton's invitation to think about where they stood with respect to the underlying principles of the Western tradition and what makes life worth living. As Lord Layton's invitation to search our own hearts and minds implies, the question of the Western tradition is not a question about a brute fact about the world called "the Western tradition" whose content and structure can be discovered, examined, and explained. Rather, as Arendt explained, the Western tradition is "a mental construct."¹⁰ As she told her students in her class on "Thinking" at the New School in the Fall of 1974, "tradition is first of all an academic matter; it depends on learning."¹¹ Searching their hearts and minds after the Second World War, Arendt and Berlin both felt the need to construct a rationalist or metaphysical Western tradition of political philosophy to serve as a heuristic device for clarifying certain issues, above all the issue of the threat of totalitarianism to what makes life worth living. They construed the Western tradition of political philosophy in Platonic terms in order to examine Nazism and Communism in its light so as to understanding the meaning of these totalitarian movements and to see more clearly our tradition's dignity and deficiency in helping us to understand politics.

In this dissertation, I set out to explore Arendt and Berlin's understanding of the Western tradition of political philosophy in the light of totalitarianism in their works of the late 1940s and 1950s. The justification for pairing Arendt and Berlin together in this dissertation is that concern with the ongoing possibility of totalitarianism or totalitarian solutions in politics is central to their postwar concern with the Western tradition of

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt's reply to J. M. Cameron, *The New York Review of Books* (January 1, 1970).

¹¹ Arendt, *Speeches and Writings—Essays and Lectures—"Thinking"—Lecture, fragments—1974-1975* (Series: Addition I, 1966-1977, n.d.), image 2, n.p. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

political philosophy. For as they reflected on the Western tradition, both Arendt and Berlin decided that the tradition was not just defeated by Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, it was also in a sense realized in those regimes. Totalitarianism, in other words, seemed to them to be both beyond the reason and comprehension of the Western tradition of political philosophy, and at the same time a telling example of our tradition's central attitude toward politics.

In exploring their ambivalent attitude toward the tradition, my goal is to illuminate how Arendt and Berlin contributed to the postwar imperative to think afresh about the Western tradition of political philosophy not only to expose its originating flaws, but also to reconstruct political philosophy on decidedly anti-totalitarian premises. What is ultimately at stake for them in seeking to understand the complicated relationship between totalitarianism and the Western tradition of political philosophy is how to proceed in political theory in a fully post-totalitarian way, having construed the Western tradition of political philosophy as both realized and defeated in totalitarianism. It is my hope to make an original contribution to our knowledge of Arendt and Berlin's construction of the immanent tendency toward totalitarian solutions in the Western tradition of political philosophy and their efforts break free of this tendency in their own political philosophies.

“They Were Very Different”

Arendt and Berlin's paths crossed several times, never happily or with good results. As young Zionists, they first met in New York sometime between September 1941 and March 1942, through their mutual friend Kurt Blumenfeld, an established leader of the

German Zionists.¹² Berlin recalls that Arendt's "fanatical Jewish nationalism" was "too much" for him at the time.¹³ On May 6-11, 1942, the international Zionist conference was held at New York's Biltmore Hotel. Arendt attended the conference and Berlin was probably there too.¹⁴ They met again about a decade later, Berlin recalls, when Arendt's views on Zionism had changed to the point where she had "attacked Israel," and this angered Berlin.¹⁵ Their paths then crossed during an international conference in Milan, Italy, on "The Future of Freedom," convened September 12-17, 1955, by the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), a conference remembered today for the "end of ideology"

¹² Arendt's friendship with Blumenfeld began in Heidelberg in 1926 (see Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 70-73). It is unknown when Berlin met and befriended Blumenfeld. Berlin recalls meeting Arendt in New York when he was with Blumenfeld. The exact place and year this meeting took place is unclear. In his conversations with Jahanbegloo, Berlin says it was 1941 (*Conversations*, p. 84). However, Ignatieff cites an earlier, unpublished letter to Bernard Crick on April 11, 1963, in which Berlin says it was 1942 (Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), p. 332n26). Berlin was often in New York between August 1941 and July 1942 and could have met Arendt (via Blumenfeld) on several occasions. According to Arendt's biographer, in New York in September 1941 Arendt attended a talk by Blumenfeld on the question of a Jewish army. In a January 30, 1942 article in *Aufbau* ("A First Step"), Arendt writes on the response to Blumenfeld's remarks on the same question at the New World Club a few days earlier (*JW*, p. 145). Arendt and Joseph Maier (the Assistant Editor of *Aufbau*) organized "the Young Jewish Group" around this time to call for a Jewish army. The group had its first meeting at the New World Club on March 11, 1942, and Blumenfeld was an active participant (Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 177). For Berlin's account of Zionist politics in the years 1940-44, see "Zionist Politics in Wartime Washington: A Fragment of Personal Reminiscence – The Jacob Herzog Memorial Lecture," in *Flourishing*, pp. 663-693 and his letter to the editor of *Ha'aretz*, November 6, 1972, in *Building*, pp. 503-505. For an account of Berlin's political views and maneuverings during this time, see Simon Albert, "The Wartime 'Special Relationship', 1941-945: Isaiah Berlin, Freya Stark and Mandate Palestine," *Jewish Historical Studies* 45 (2013), pp. 103-130 and Anne Deighton, "Don and diplomat: Isaiah Berlin and Britain's early Cold War," *Cold War History* 13:4 (2013), pp. 525-40.

¹³ Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, p. 332n26.

¹⁴ While there is evidence in his letters and writings that Berlin was well aware of what transpired at the conference, there is no piece of evidence indicating that he was in attendance. Arendt was in attendance according to Richard L. Rubenstein, who was there as a young observer. See Rubenstein, "Hannah Arendt, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel," *New English Review* (December 2012), p. online <http://newenglishreview.org/Richard_L._Rubenstein/Hannah_Arendt,_the_Holocaust,_and_the_State_of_Israel/>

¹⁵ Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 84. I have not been able to figure out when or where this second meeting could have taken place.

discourse swirling around it.¹⁶ The conference featured Arendt as a member of the American delegation,¹⁷ and drew in the newly married Berlin.¹⁸ Whether Arendt and Berlin exchanged any words with each other, or even saw each other, is not known, but they were both in attendance. Their final encounter was in April 1967 at a conference on the Russian Revolution held at Harvard University. The papers presented at the conference were published in the volume *Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Anchor, 1969), edited by Richard Pipes, which also contains summaries of the discussions in which Arendt and Berlin both participated. As the summaries show, Berlin did not let any remark by Arendt go unchallenged. Berlin's pedantic zeal to correct Arendt's thoughts on Russia and Stalin reflected his opinion, formed after reading Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, that "on the Russians"—Berlin's area of expertise—"she was mostly wrong."¹⁹

¹⁶ See Giles Scott-Smith, "The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the End of Ideology and the 1955 Milan Conference: 'Defining the Parameters of Discourse,'" *Journal of Contemporary History* 37:3 (July 2002), pp. 437-455; Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), p. 384.

¹⁷ The American delegates to the conference included George F. Kennan, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Sidney Hook, Friedrich von Hayek, John K. Galbraith, Merle Fainsod, Daniel Bell and Hannah Arendt. See "'Future of Freedom' Set for Milan Study," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 5, 1955, p. 12.

¹⁸ On the extent of Berlin's involvement with the CCF, see Cherniss, *A Mind and its Time*, pp. 74-75. Isaiah married Aline Halban in the summer of 1955; they honeymooned in the south of France. Carol Brightman, *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1992), p. 383, reports that Isaiah and Aline were in Milan for the CCF, where many of their friends, such as Mary McCarthy and Dwight Macdonald, would be speaking or auditing. That Berlin was in attendance at the 1955 CCF seems to be a fact according to Frances Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain*, p. 396, who relies on a letter from Mary McCarthy to her husband, Bowden Broadwater, who was in New York. Immediately before the Milan conference Isaiah and Aline were in Rome for the Tenth International Congress of Historical Sciences, which took place September 4-11. As Ignatieff reports, Berlin spent the rest of that fall in Chicago lecturing at the University of Chicago, where he met the political philosopher Leo Strauss and the former Governor of Illinois and Democratic candidate for President, Adlai Stevenson. Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, p. 219. For Berlin's view of the strangeness of Leo Strauss, see *Conversations*, pp. 31-32. For Berlin's view of Adlai Stevenson as lacking Machiavellian political instincts, see his 1965 interview with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "On JFK," *The New York Review of Books* (October 22, 1998).

¹⁹ Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 82.

The main challenge in writing about Arendt and Berlin is simply that, as the sociologist Richard Sennett said in an interview, “they were very different.” Asked to elaborate on what he called Arendt’s “terrible relations” with Berlin, Sennett said the following:

Isaiah was very prudent intellectually; he was not an innovator. He was a great interpreter, but he was very prudent. And prudence is not a word you could ever ascribe to Arendt. Everything was a categorical declaration. She was married to a wonderful man named Heinrich Blucher. [. . .] And he used to kid her about it. He’d say, “Another truth, huh?” Anyhow, she and Berlin just, you know, their temperaments were so different. She remained all her life, no matter what she wrote, she remained a German. She was in exile. She was in no doubt about it. [. . .] She was somebody who was still living in Weimar Germany. Isaiah—this wasn’t the case. I mean, of course he spoke Russian, and he had a scope, I think, that most British intellectuals—just because they didn’t have his experience—lacked. Isaiah became a member of the establishment here [in England]. Arendt was never a member of the American establishment. [. . .] So they were very different. It was a mutual allergy.²⁰

Their mutual allergy was not just personal; it also extended to their different styles of thinking. Berlin said he “tried”—and failed—to read Arendt’s *Origins* and *The Human Condition*.²¹ He did not try to make sense of her works because, as he said, “I think she produces no arguments, no evidence of serious philosophical or historical thought. It is all a stream of metaphysical free association. She moves from one sentence to another, without logical connection, without either rational or imaginative links between them.”²²

²⁰ Alan Macfarlane, interview with Richard Sennett at CRASSH, Cambridge, April 3 and 24, 2009. I made the transcript from the video, which is available online at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sy4ecJukKBc>>. Sennett’s comments about Arendt were made on April 24, and begin around the 27-minute mark.

²¹ Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 82.

²² Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 82. David Caute presents the evidence of Berlin’s hatred toward Arendt in “The Banality of Evil: Berlin and Arendt,” chapter 21 in *Isaac & Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 262-272.

Arendt, for her part, read very little of what Berlin wrote, and rarely mentioned him in her notes and writings. Arendt believed that her English readers, thanks to their “linguistic ‘philosophers’,”²³ could never understand her attempts to clarify and think through political concepts. For example, she distinguished between “liberty” and “freedom” while Berlin used the two words synonymously in his “Two Concepts of Liberty” lecture. This is just what Englishmen trained in linguistic philosophy would do, Arendt observed in her *Denktagebuch*. “If everyday speech makes synonyms of words whose original meanings are quite different, they accept them as synonyms.”²⁴ Arendt did not expect her English readers to understand her thinking nor did she look to learn much from theirs.

All this is to say that in order to do justice to Arendt and Berlin’s unique and irreconcilable approaches and outlooks, I have found it necessary to treat their works separately in the body of each chapter. Where direct points of comparison and contrast present themselves, I have tried to make those connections. But I’ve erred on the side of a “static” comparison of the two so that their usually very different views can be brought to light in their own right.

Their impulses for thinking about the Western tradition and its relationship with totalitarianism are nicely encapsulated in the radio talks that Arendt and Berlin gave in the early 1950s. In 1952 Berlin delivered six hour-long lectures on the BBC on Helvétius,

²³ Arendt, *D2*, April 1970, pp. 770-771. See also her letter to Blücher written from Manchester, June 21, 1952: “The English couldn’t for the life of them figure out what I am talking about. It wasn’t my fault. But this is England, and they don’t have the slightest idea about the things that almost cost them their necks, and might very well still do so.” Arendt, *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher 1936-1968*, ed. Lotte Kohler and trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Harcourt, 2000), p. 194.

²⁴ Arendt, *D2*, April 1970, p. 770.

Rousseau, Fichte, Hegel, Saint-Simon and Maistre, which are published in *Freedom and Its Betrayal*. The theme of Berlin's lectures was that these thinkers were all hostile to freedom, and "their influence upon mankind not only in the nineteenth century, but particularly in the twentieth, was powerful in this anti-libertarian direction."²⁵ Berlin believed their thought had been used in the twentieth-century as the justification "both for Communism and for Fascism, for almost every enactment which has sought to obstruct human liberty and to vivisection human society into a single, continuous, harmonious whole, in which men are intended to be devoid of any degree of individual initiative."²⁶

Meanwhile Arendt was preparing to speak on German radio about the meaning of totalitarian terror ("Mankind and Terror") and the works of Hegel and Marx ("From Hegel to Marx"), two thinkers who stand together at the end of the Western tradition of philosophy and to whom the totalitarian impulse could be traced back to. After Marx turned Hegel's philosophy of history into a process of development, Arendt told her listeners, "there is only one step left for the Marxist concept of development to become ideological process-thinking—the step that ultimately leads to totalitarian coercive deduction based on a single premise."²⁷ The single premise, Arendt explained in her terror talk, is that all individuals are specimens of the species of humankind, and history or nature has already passed judgment on which classes or races will not survive and whose death Hitler and Stalin merely made it their task to "accelerate."²⁸ It was the success of the Nazi concentration camps in denaturing human beings so that they submit

²⁵ Berlin, *FIB*, p. 6.

²⁶ Berlin, *FIB*, p. 27.

²⁷ Arendt, *FHM*, p. 75.

²⁸ Arendt, *MT*, p. 306.

themselves to the inhuman laws of motion of nature or history and experience themselves and others as essentially superfluous that prompted Arendt to call the evil of totalitarianism “absolute” or “radical” and to announce that evil would be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe.²⁹

In the next two sections of this introduction I elaborate on these crucial differences between Arendt and Berlin with respect to their different approaches to the Western tradition’s defeat and realization in totalitarianism.

Hannah Arendt

Born in 1906 in Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad), Arendt studied in Berlin from 1922-23 (with Romano Guardini), in Marburg from 1924-26 (with Martin Heidegger and Rudolf Bultmann), in Freiburg from 1926-27 (attending Edmund Husserl’s lectures) and in Heidelberg from 1927-28 (with Karl Jaspers). Under Jasper’s supervision she completed her dissertation on St. Augustine in 1929. In Germany she had friendly contacts with leaders of the Zionist movement (e.g. Kurt Blumenfeld) and the group of Jewish intellectuals that later published *Commentary* (founded in 1945).³⁰ After being arrested and detained for eight days for documenting anti-Jewish activity in Germany, she left Germany in August 1933 and went to France (via Czechoslovakia and Switzerland). In Paris (1933-41) she researched the history of anti-Semitism at the

²⁹ See Arendt, *NF*, p. 124. For a good discussion of this topic see Dana Villa, “Terror and Radical Evil,” ch. 1 in *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 11-38.

³⁰ For more details on the founders, editors and contributors of *Commentary* and the *Partisan Review*, see Ruth R. Wisse, “Jewish American renaissance,” ch. 10 in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, eds. Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 190-211.

Bibliothèque nationale de France, found a job as the secretary general for Youth Aliyah's Paris office through the family connections of her first husband, Gunter Stern (whom she married in 1929 and divorced in 1937), and met and befriended Walter Benjamin.

After being arrested and briefly imprisoned in Gurs, a French internment camp for women, in 1940, Arendt left France in January 1941 with her second husband (Heinrich Blücher) and mother, on an emergency visa from the unoccupied zone. When she arrived in New York (via Spain and Portugal) she worked for several years as “a kind of free-lance writer, something between a historian and a political journalist.”³¹ She remained in contact with various Jewish organizations up to 1944, when she began to teach European history part time at Brooklyn College (1945-47) and to concentrate on writing *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). In the late 1940s she was in contact with the editors and contributors to the journal *Partisan Review*, from 1946-48 she was a chief editor at Schocken Books under Salmon Schocken,³² and from the 1950s until her death her main contacts were in the academic world. She received many prestigious awards and held visiting or otherwise restricted professorships and fellowships at Berkeley (1955), Princeton (1959), Columbia (1960), Northwestern (1961), Wesleyan (1961-62), Chicago (1963-75), Cornell (1965), The New School for Social Research (1967-75) and Yale (1969-75).

Over the course of a conference on her work at York University in Toronto in November 1972, at which she was the guest of honor, Hannah Arendt revealed many

³¹ Letter to Karl Jaspers, November 18, 1945, *HAKJ*, p. 23. For her work during the early 1940s, see *JW*.

³² For an account of Arendt's activities as an editor that is critical of her lack of ear for things Jewish and American, see Martin Greenberg, “Concerning Hannah Arendt: She Knew She Was Right,” *Yale Review* 95:1 (2007), pp. 74-100.

aspects of her thinking to the participants. In response to Stan Spyros Draenos's paper, "Thinking Without a Ground: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Situation of Understanding," Arendt took issue with his "cruel" characterization of her thinking as "groundless." She told the audience: "I call it thinking without a banister. In German, *Denken ohne Geländer*. . . . And this is indeed what I try to do."³³ What the audience may not have grasped at the time was that for Arendt the need to think without a banister arose in the course of her efforts in the late 1940s to come to terms with the appearance of "radical" or "absolute" evil in the Nazi death factories.³⁴

As she struggled to face up to, understand, and resist the "radical evil" of totalitarian domination, Arendt began to realize how miserably inadequate the Western tradition's intellectual resources were for understanding the twentieth century's horribly original solution to its political, social, and economic predicaments. In her concluding remarks to the first edition of *Origins*, Arendt was somewhat reluctant to admit the appearance of "absolute evil" in totalitarian solutions. For to make such a bold claim would mean, she believed, "that the whole of nearly three thousand years of Western civilization, as we have known it in a comparatively uninterrupted stream of tradition, has broken down; the whole structure of Western culture with all its implied beliefs, traditions, standards of judgment, has come toppling down over our heads."³⁵ In the second, revised edition of *Origins* she throws off her reluctance to make sense of totalitarianism as a form of radical evil, and emphasizes that we are really out in the cold

³³ Arendt, *Toronto*, pp. 336-37.

³⁴ Arendt uses the phrases "radical evil" and "absolute evil" interchangeably on page 459 of *OT*. She uses both phrases elsewhere in the book (e.g. pp. viii, 443).

³⁵ Arendt, *Burdens*, p. 433-34.

conceptually because “It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a ‘radical evil.’” “Therefore,” she continues, “we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know.”³⁶ In response to a wonderful letter from Alice B. Sheldon, who had joined the US Army Air Force as an intelligence officer in 1942 and was in Germany in 1945 and later read excerpts of *Origins* to other officers, Arendt summarized her convictions about totalitarianism: “The chief danger (clear and present) here as elsewhere is that it is only too natural for people to be reluctant about admitting that we are confronted with a new phenomenon and that the old concepts will not do, neither in understanding the enemy nor in devising means to deal with him.”³⁷

After the publication of *Origins* in 1951, Arendt found herself, as she wrote to Kurt Blumenfeld in 1952, “(happily) between two stools.”³⁸ On the one hand, the whole intellectual, but especially moral and political, framework of the Western tradition had come “toppling down” with the appearance of totalitarianism in Germany. As Arendt wrote to Blumenfeld, “[I] see...the foundations totter and break my head over this.”³⁹

For Arendt, not some new “idea” but the actual “event” and “actions” of totalitarianism

³⁶ Arendt, *OT*, p. 459. This passage appears in the last paragraph of the “Total Domination” subsection of Chapter 12, “Totalitarianism in Power.” This subsection is based on Arendt’s *Partisan Review* essay, “The Concentration Camps” (July 1948). See also *MT*, p. 302. As Arendt would put it in 1965-66: “We—at least the older ones among us—have witnessed the total collapse of all established moral standards in public and private life during the nineteen-thirties and -forties, not only (as is now usually assumed) in Hitler’s Germany but also in Stalin’s Russia” (*SQMP*, p. 52).

³⁷ Letter to Alice B. Sheldon, February 6, 1953, image 12, p. 009442. General, 1938-1976, n.d.—“Se-Si” miscellaneous—1953-1975, n.d. (Series: Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d.). Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁸ Quoted in Steven E. Aschheim, “Hannah Arendt and the Complexities of Jewish Selfhood,” chapter 2 in *Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 68.

³⁹ Quoted in Aschheim, “Hannah Arendt and the Complexities of Jewish Selfhood,” p. 68.

revealed that the “foundations” of our “political framework” were “no longer secure.”⁴⁰ She believed that the “dignity” of the tradition of Western political philosophy was “usurped” when Nazism took root in Germany and expanded across Europe.⁴¹ She insisted that the ideological content of Nazism, especially racism, had “no traditional basis at all,” it owed “nothing to any part of the Western tradition, be it German or not, Catholic or Protestant, Christian, Greek, or Roman.”⁴² She refused to enter debates about totalitarianism’s intellectual roots in the Western tradition because, as she explained to Thilo Koch in 1964, to focus on “the depths of Germany’s, and even Europe’s, intellectual past...[is to] argue away the phenomenon’s most conspicuous hallmark: that is, its utter shallowness. That something can be born in the gutter and despite its lack of depth can at the same time gain power over almost everyone—that is what makes the phenomenon so frightening.”⁴³

And yet she did not think that the Western tradition was actually innocent of totalitarian elements or impulses. As she told Blumenfeld in 1952, the tradition’s

⁴⁰ Arendt, *UP*, pp. 309-10, 316, and *Reply*, p. 405.

⁴¹ Arendt, *OT*, p. ix.

⁴² Arendt, *GP*, p. 108.

⁴³ Arendt, *JW*, p. 487. See also *UP*, p. 309 and *Heidegger*, p. 302n3. To keep her readers focused on totalitarianism, Arendt avoided even the appearance of engaging in “unduly academic” disputes about “what can and what cannot be comprehended in terms of the tradition” by simply stating what she would “propose to accept” in such a dispute:

I propose to accept the rise of totalitarianism as a demonstrably new form of government, as an event that, at least politically, palpably concerns the lives of all of us, not only the thought of a relatively few individuals or the destinies of certain specific national or social groups. Only this event, with its concomitant change of all political conditions and relationships that previously existed on the earth, rendered irreparable and unhealable the various “breaks” that have been seen retrospectively in its wake. Totalitarianism as an event has made the break in our tradition an accomplished fact, and as an event it could never have been foreseen or forethought, much less predicted or “caused,” by any single man. (*KMPT*, p. 281)

breakdown in the face of Hitler and Stalin prompted her to “read philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche to find out why the West never actually had a decent political philosophy; or the other way around, why the great tradition is dumb, silent when we ask our questions.”⁴⁴ As she wrote to Karl Jaspers around this time: “I suspect that philosophy is not altogether innocent in this fine how-do-you-do. Not, of course, in the sense that Hitler had anything to do with Plato...Instead, perhaps in the sense that Western philosophy has never had a clear concept of what constitutes the political, and couldn’t have one, because, by necessity, it spoke of man the individual and dealt with the fact of plurality tangentially.”⁴⁵

The great tradition of political philosophy, Arendt argued forcefully in 1953-54, perceived human plurality not as a mark of the existence (or essence) of humanity, but as an annoying fact, “as if it indicated no more than the sum total of reasonable beings, who, because of some decisive defect, are forced to live together and form a political body.”⁴⁶ The philosophers are annoyed with human plurality because it makes human beings dependent on each other, interferes with the isolation and solitude that philosophers need to think, and accounts for opinions instead of truth.⁴⁷ Most annoying, however, is the sheer contingency and unpredictability of action that arises from human plurality. To eliminate this radical unpredictability, the solution provided by the philosophical tradition

⁴⁴ Quoted in Aschheim, “Hannah Arendt and the Complexities of Jewish Selfhood,” p. 68. See also Arendt, *UP*, p. 316.

⁴⁵ Letter to Karl Jaspers, March 4, 1951, *HAKJ*, p. 166. We can trace the roots of this thought back to November 1950, when Arendt wrote in her *Denktagebuch*: “If Man is the topic of philosophy and Men the subject of politics, then totalitarianism signifies a victory of ‘philosophy’ over politics—and not the other way round. It is as though the final victory of philosophy would mean the final extermination of the philosophers. Perhaps, they have become ‘superfluous’” (*DI*, p. 43).

⁴⁶ Arendt, *TPT*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *NewSchool*, image 12, n.p.

from Plato to Marx has been to eliminate human plurality by conceptualizing humanity “as though we were One man, members of one gigantic and needlessly separated organism.”⁴⁸ As Arendt went on to explain in her unpublished 1954 lecture on the problem of action and thought after the French Revolution:

This organism can be conceived of in the image of Hobbes’ Leviathan or after the Platonian model of the herd which the statesman guards as the wise shepherd or in the fashion of the ideal republic proposed by the old Plato in the *Nomoi* where the laws themselves have taken out of human hands all necessity and responsibility for action or in the manner of Hegel’s world history where all men become somehow the puppets of some higher will which pulls the strings (an image by the way which we find already in Plato), each time the same happens: action has lost its unpredictability and with it seemingly its haphazardness, its accidental character; by the same token, mankind has lost its characteristic of plurality. It is as though not men, but One Man inhabits the earth.⁴⁹

In 1953, shortly before writing the foregoing words, Arendt began to interpret totalitarianism as the triumph of philosophy over politics by describing it as a plurality-destroying form of government that fuses isolated individuals together in “a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions.”⁵⁰ This One Man is not human at all because it signifies the total degradation and destruction of the individuality and unpredictable spontaneity of a plurality of human beings. Clearly, even though totalitarianism usurped the “dignity” of our tradition, Arendt did not hold the tradition to be fundamentally sound with respect to politics or entirely innocent with respect to totalitarianism.

⁴⁸ Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics: the Problem of Action and Thought after the French Revolution,” lecture—1954 (1 of 4 folders) (Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d.), image 19, p. 023373. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁹ Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics: the Problem of Action and Thought after the French Revolution,” lecture—1954 (1 of 4 folders) (Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923-1975, n.d.), image 19, p. 023373. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁰ Arendt, *IT*, p. 312.

To express the fact that the tradition of political philosophy was broken, and that its breakdown was self-inflicted, Arendt found Denis de Rougemont's words from *The Devil's Share* apropos: "[we] are all in the sinking ship, and at the same time...are all in the ship that has launched the torpedo."⁵¹ This is not a dialectical interpretation of totalitarianism in which some greater good is bound to come out of the evil of the concentration camps like a phoenix rising from the Nazi death factories, "rejuvenated from the ashes of its embodiment," as Hegel wrote in *Reason in History*.⁵² Indeed, one of the often overlooked reasons Arendt gave for speaking of the "banality" of evil with respect to Adolf Eichmann's role in the Holocaust was to deny "that there is even such a thing as the power of evil to bring forth something good."⁵³ Berlin, too, argued that nobody with a sense of reality could say that the "advances of totalitarianism" followed some cosmic, Hegelian pattern of inevitable "progress towards individual liberty."⁵⁴ Nor did Arendt believe that the ship of European civilization sailing on the ocean of time could be kept afloat by holding fast to its goods and "discard[ing] the bad...as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion" as it sails into a bright future.⁵⁵ Rather, when confronted not just with understanding the radical evil of the concentration camps but with all the moral and political predicaments of our time, we find ourselves, in

⁵¹ Arendt, *NF*, p. 135.

⁵² Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Library of Liberal Arts, 1953), p. 89. For Arendt's dismissal of Hegelian dialectics as a "superstition" after the Holocaust, see Arendt, "The Concentration Camps," *Partisan Review* 15:7 (July 1948), pp. 747-48.

⁵³ Arendt, "Answers to Questions Submitted by Samuel Grafton," in *JW*, p. 479.

⁵⁴ Berlin, *SR*, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Arendt, *OT*, p. ix.

Arendt's nautical image, in a dark, desolate night, "out in the cold," without any "banisters" to lean on, "in a position between the devil and the deep sea."⁵⁶

In a picture similar to Walter Benjamin's profoundly "undialectic" image of the "angel of history" facing "the expanse of ruins of the past" as he moves backwards into the future, Arendt describes the task of the inhabitants of the ship of European civilization sailing on the ocean of time, without the great tradition to anchor their sense of past and future, much less to guide them safely through either of those time dimensions, as that of discovering and preserving the past for themselves.⁵⁷ That is, the breakdown of the tradition does not mean the loss of the past; it means that the past may now "open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear."⁵⁸ We are in the position "to look upon the past with eyes undistracted by any tradition, with a directness which has disappeared from Occidental reading and hearing ever since Roman civilization submitted to the authority of Greek thought."⁵⁹ What is needed with respect to our tradition of political thought is "a new beginning and reconsideration of the past."⁶⁰ The break in tradition means two things with respect to the reconsideration of the past. First, by analogy with the Renaissance, the break offers us the opportunity—nay, the urgent necessity—to go "to the sources [of our concepts]" in past

⁵⁶ Arendt, *Toronto*, p. 336 and *PRUD*, p. 25. In the 1940s and 50s travel between Europe and America was by ship. In the Spring of 1941, Arendt and Blucher escaped from the Nazis by sailing from Lisbon to New York. According to Young-Bruehl, while waiting for their ship in Lisbon they "read Benjamin's 'Theses [on the Philosophy of History]' aloud to each other and to the refugees who gathered around them" (*Hannah Arendt*, p. 162).

⁵⁷ Arendt, *Benjamin*, p. 165.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *Authority*, p. 94. See also *CC*, p. 204.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *TMA*, pp. 28-29.

⁶⁰ Arendt, *TMA*, p. 28.

political experiences in order to conceptualize them ourselves.⁶¹ Second, by analogy with Benjamin's deep-sea pearl diver, it offers us the chance to discover and preserve in new concepts the political experiences of the Western world that had been lost on the tradition and allowed (or made) to sink into "oblivion."⁶²

Once the sources of our concepts and hitherto unconceptualized political experiences have been recovered and (re)conceptualized, Arendt hopes that they may supply the groundwork for "a new political philosophy from which could come a new science of politics."⁶³ As we know from Arendt's own experiments in critical thinking, this new political philosophy, animated by an admiring wonder toward politics, asks genuinely philosophical questions such as What is action? Why do we act? What is thinking? Why do we think at all? How are thinking and acting connected? What is politics? Who is man as a political being? What is freedom? And most philosophical of all, Why is there anybody at all and not rather nobody?⁶⁴ At some point Arendt gave her idea and practice of a "new political philosophy" the name of "political theory" in order to distinguish it from the old Platonic tradition of political philosophy with its "enmity against all politics."⁶⁵

Isaiah Berlin

⁶¹ Arendt, *TMA*, pp. 25-26.

⁶² Arendt, *TPT*, p. 44 and *KMPT*, pp. 298, 303.

⁶³ Arendt, *PP*, p. 103.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Arendt, *CP*, p. 433 and *Epilogue*, p. 204.

⁶⁵ Arendt, *Gaus*, pp. 3-4. It is unclear exactly when Arendt started to think of herself as a political theorist as opposed to a philosopher or political philosopher. In a letter to one of her students at Northwestern, Mr. Charles Courtney, Arendt wrote on Oct. 30, 1961: "Also, although I am flattered that you think I am a philosopher, officially I am not. I am in political theory." Students—Misc. Correspondence—A-M—1971 (1949-1975, n.d.), image 13, p. 020544. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. For other denials of being a philosopher, see *Thinking*, p. 3.

Born in 1909 in Riga (now Latvia), Berlin lived in Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg, then Leningrad, now St. Petersburg) from 1916 to 1920, where he witnessed both the Liberal and the Bolshevik Revolutions. In 1920 he escaped with his family from the Bolsheviks and settled in England, where he ended up writing his first book, *Karl Marx* (1939). He was educated at St. Paul's School, London (1921-28), and then at Corpus Christi College, Oxford (1928-32). From 1932-1938 and from 1950-1966 he was a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and from 1938-1950 a Fellow of New College, Oxford. During the war he served as the First Secretary at the British Embassy in Washington, D.C., from 1942-45, and then in Moscow from 1945-46, where he directly encountered Stalinist and Communist claims that individuals in Western democratic societies were not as free or liberated as those in the Soviet Union.

After the war and his visit to Moscow, Berlin returned to Oxford (via brief stays in Sweden and Washington) where he arrived at his decision to leave “philosophy proper”⁶⁶ (logic, epistemology, speech analysis, etc.) in order to research, write, and teach on the history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*), especially the ideas of the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia, his “spiritual home.”⁶⁷ It was while writing his Marx book that Berlin distracted himself by reading Alexander Herzen, whose “vigorous moral standards about both life & politics”⁶⁸ and “emotional recoil from the vivisection of living human beings in the name of any abstractions”⁶⁹ he credits for his decision to abandon

⁶⁶ See Berlin's letter to Morton White, November 1950, *Enlightening*, p. 202.

⁶⁷ Letter to Myron Gilmore, December 26, 1949, *Enlightening*, pp. 148-49.

⁶⁸ Letter to Stuart Hampshire, July 1937, *Flourishing*, p. 239.

⁶⁹ Letter to Elena Levin, November 30, 1954, *Enlightening*, p. 454.

philosophy for the history of ideas.⁷⁰ Whether it was due to his reading of Herzen in the 1930s or, as his father believed, his work in Moscow, Berlin officially started working in the field of the history of ideas in 1949-1950.⁷¹ In 1957 he was knighted and became the Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at the University of Oxford, a chair he held for ten years (1957-1967). Berlin became a high-profile public intellectual after the war, when he gave many distinguished lectures in England and America and served as a visiting professor at Harvard, Chicago, and Princeton. He was the founding president of Wolfson College, Oxford, from 1966-75, and President of the British Academy from 1974-1978.

Compared with Arendt's monumental effort to understand Nazi Germany, Berlin was "stupefied" and lapsed into stunned silence upon learning of Nazi extermination camps in 1945, "much later than a lot of people," he admitted, shamefully.⁷² Like Arendt, he thought the destruction of the Jews by the Nazis "the greatest single crime ever committed by anybody in known Western history."⁷³ Unlike Arendt, however, Berlin thought of totalitarianism primarily in terms of Marxism-based Communism in Lenin and Stalin's Russia.

Berlin experienced Stalin's Russia when he was sent to Moscow in September 1945 to work for the rest of the year at the British Embassy. He arrived in the Soviet Union during the "season of good feeling" that the country had created for itself in the

⁷⁰ Berlin, "My Philosophy," in Thomas Mautner, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford, 1996), p. 51.

⁷¹ See the excerpt from Mendel Berlin's family memoir in *Flourishing*, p. 587.

⁷² Berlin, *Death*, p. 36.

⁷³ Berlin, *Death*, pp. 36-37. See also *Conversations*, pp. 19-22. The Nazis exterminated several members of Berlin's family—grandmothers, grandfathers, a great-uncle, a great-aunt, and an uncle, aunt, and cousin—in Riga in 1941.

non-Communist West as a result of its successful war against Hitler, a time, Berlin notes, when Russian poets were “heroic figures” on account of their widely read war poems.⁷⁴ The poets and other intellectuals whom Berlin met suffered under Communist repression and were acutely aware of the extent to which the life of their society was being engineered, as Berlin put it, “into a blindly obedient force held together by a military discipline and a set of perpetually ingeminated formulae...to shut out independent thought.”⁷⁵ Shutting out independent thought was one aspect of the “change of attitude to the function and value of the intellect” that Berlin identified with twentieth-century Communism.⁷⁶

Consider Berlin’s meeting with the Russian Jew, soldier, and poet Ilya Selvinsky. In the summer of 1945, shortly before Berlin’s visit to Moscow, Selvinsky wrote in his diary about Soviet life:

Just one and only one person has a right to think. [...] The only people who flourish here are the ones with gifts that have nothing to do with philosophy. Composers, painters, architects, and especially writers have it bad. They will be given money, they will not starve, but let them forget that they themselves can represent something. Even for these lines, if they end up in the hands of a scoundrel, I could be arrested or in the very least deprived of the right to write.⁷⁷

When Berlin met Selvinsky in October at a salon and supper party, Selvinsky had recently been “ruthlessly suppressed” at a committee meeting for attempting to revise the Party’s line on art and literature, and was keen to regain official approval.⁷⁸ Speaking to

⁷⁴ Berlin, *MWRW*, pp. 357, 364. See also *SM*, pp. 9, 13-18.

⁷⁵ Berlin, *PITC*, p. 367.

⁷⁶ Berlin, *PITC*, p. 369.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Maxim D. Shrayer, *I SAW IT: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), p. 213.

⁷⁸ Berlin, *SM*, p. 18. Berlin probably met Selvinsky on October 30, before he met Akmatova and Pasternak in mid-November. Frank Roberts notes in a letter to Christopher Warner that on October 30 Berlin was in

Berlin in an overly loud voice so as to be heard by the concealed microphones, Selvinsky said: “I know that we are called conformists in the West. We are. We conform because we find that whenever we deviate from the Party’s directives it always turns out that the Party was right and that we were wrong. It has always been so. It is not only that they say that they know better: they do; they see further—their eyes are sharper, their horizons are wider, than ours.”⁷⁹ In his wartime diary at the time, however, Selvinsky noted that the Party was far from always right: “In our public I am dismayed by the immobility of error, if this error is made by somebody on instruction from above.”⁸⁰ To Berlin, then, Selvinsky was saying the opposite of what he thought was true; he had not completely surrendered his intelligence and integrity to the Party, and so continued to distinguish between truth and falsehood.

The danger of human beings under Soviet Communism losing every trace of critical thought and experiencing themselves as things belonging to the Party, a danger made vivid in Orwell’s *1984*, was brought home to Berlin at the same salon when he naively brought up the idea of the free discussion of political issues. “We are a scientifically governed society,” one of Lenin’s former secretaries responded. “[A]nd if there is no room for free thinking in physics,” she continued, in words that Berlin elsewhere attributes to Auguste Comte, “why should we, Marxists, who have discovered the laws of history and society, permit free thinking in the social sphere? Freedom to be wrong is not freedom; you seem to think that we lack freedom of political discussion; I

attendance at “a Russian supper party consisting largely of professional writers and their wives, and wartime undemobilised officers.” Quoted in *Flourishing*, p. 594.

⁷⁹ Berlin, *MWRW*, pp. 373-74.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Maxim D. Shrayer, *I SAW IT*, p. 196.

simply do not understand what you mean. Truth liberates: we are freer than you in the West.”⁸¹

In these words, Lenin’s former secretary (channeling Comte) had not just articulated a Communist view of freedom, but a view of political life deeply rooted in the Western rationalist tradition of political philosophy. As Berlin writes in “Two Concepts of Liberty”:

Comte put bluntly what had been implicit in the rationalist theory of politics from its ancient Greek beginnings. There can, in principle, be only one correct way of life; the wise lead it spontaneously, that is why they are called wise. The unwise must be dragged towards it by all the social means in the power of the wise; for why should demonstrable error be suffered to survive and breed?⁸²

Thus it is no surprise that Berlin identified Communism in particular, and totalitarianism in general, with the rationalist theory of politics, which he took to be the central “tradition”⁸³ or “thesis”⁸⁴ or “current”⁸⁵ of Western philosophy that began with Plato and cast its spell over Western political philosophy. When he returned to Oxford after his visit to Moscow, Berlin became preoccupied with this central tradition, which he referred to as “monism.”⁸⁶

“Monism” does not name or describe a particular ideology or vision of utopia; it is best understood, as I argue in chapter 1, as a metaphysical worldview, a vision of the universe and of human affairs as fundamentally rational, harmonious, and intelligible in the light of reason to all rational men. For Arendt, the monist outlook encompasses the

⁸¹ Berlin, *MWRW*, p. 374.

⁸² Berlin, *TCL*, p. 36. See also *IWEK*, pp. 27-28.

⁸³ Berlin, *TRR*, p. 170.

⁸⁴ Berlin, *MIP*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ Berlin, *NM*, p. 68.

⁸⁶ Berlin, *MIP*, p. 5.

“traditional hierarchy” between the *vita contemplative* and the *vita activa* and between the human activities within the latter. This outlook conceives of society as one single organism and assumes “that the same central human preoccupation must prevail in all activities of men,” that there must be “one comprehensive principle” in order to establish any order.⁸⁷ Berlin analyzes the monistic conception of the world in terms of three presuppositions, propositions, or pillars. First, that all serious and genuine questions, of value and of fact, of theory and of practice, have objective, true, timeless answers. Second, that with the right techniques of discovery, and under the right conditions, these answers are in principle knowable and communicable to all human beings. Third, that all the true answers are compatible and form a harmonious, frictionless whole that represents the perfect or ideal society, the final solution to the problems of human living-together.⁸⁸

What the literature on Berlin’s conception of monism consistently overlooks is that monism may be found at “the root of both democracy and Communism [i.e., Marxism-based totalitarianism].”⁸⁹ Like Arendt, Berlin took for granted in the early 1950s that what was salient about Marxism was its Europeanness, its roots in the Western rationalist tradition. As Berlin wrote to Alan Dudley in the Foreign Office in 1948, the real differences between Communist and Western European thought has little to do with monism, i.e., “the roots of our tradition in Christianity & Greece etc. which Marxism can—& w[oul]d—either equally claim or oppose with a materialist theory which in some measure we accept too.” According to Berlin, what distinguishes Western civilization from Communism is the West’s belief in civil liberties, the rule of law and “the value &

⁸⁷ Arendt, *HC*, p. 17 and pp. 47-48n38.

⁸⁸ For these three pillars, see, e.g., *EUV*, pp. 183-85, *EER*, pp. 201-202, *ARW*, pp. 209-210.

⁸⁹ Berlin, *DCI*, p. 1.

truth of a man's opinions & activities.”⁹⁰ That is, in contrast to Communist thought, the West believes in the possibility for individuals separated by class interests to have “identical interests or ideals” with respect to “such concepts as truth, goodness, justice, kindness, compromise etc.” that are not simply “open or disguised material interests...but genuinely common to different classes, individuals & societies.”⁹¹

It is easy to see how the monist outlook harbors the seeds of totalitarianism. As Berlin explains:

The doctrine that there is one truth and one only, which the whole of one's life should be made to serve, one method, and one only, of arriving at it, and one body of experts alone qualified to discover and interpret it—this ancient and familiar doctrine can take many shapes. But even in its most idealistic and unworldly forms, it is, in essence, totalitarian...[for it allows] no intrinsic virtue to variety of opinion or conduct as such; indeed, the opposite. For there can be no more than one truth, one right way of life. Only vice and error are many.⁹²

Totalitarian societies that seek to impose the final solution on humans ruthlessly and at all costs and in the name of truth or reason are monist in the obvious sense in that they seek to organize society in accordance with a monistic structure of goals and values, like a highly rigid, regimented, disciplined army on the march. The soldiers in an army cannot do what they want; they do not choose their goals and they are not free to act on their own initiative. They are embedded in hierarchies of command and obedience, and the authorities set their goals for them.⁹³ Their virtues are the military virtues of loyalty, dedication, energy and obedience.⁹⁴ Since the ends and purposes of life are set for them,

⁹⁰ Letter to Alan Dudley, March 17, 1948, *Enlightening*, p. 46.

⁹¹ Letter to Alan Dudley, March 17, 1948, *Enlightening*, pp. 46-47.

⁹² Berlin, *SM*, pp. 134-35.

⁹³ Berlin, *HI*, p. 39.

⁹⁴ Berlin, *SM*, p. 143.

Berlin imagines that they do not suffer from the burdens and anxieties that beset those who enjoy individual freedom, responsibility, and choice.⁹⁵ Totalitarian leaders, Berlin writes, “represent all situations as critical emergencies, demanding ruthless elimination of all goals, interpretations, forms of behavior save for one absolutely specific, concrete, immediate end, binding on everyone, which calls for ends and means so narrow and clearly definable that it is easy to impose sanctions for failing to pursue them.”⁹⁶

However, the monist worldview may be, and in the tradition was and is, founded on the classical, humanist assumption of the unity of mankind and the universality of human nature:

[According to the] ideas about the ends of life...of our forefathers, at least those prevalent before the second half of the eighteenth century...the world was a single, intelligible whole. It consisted of certain stable ingredients, material and spiritual; if they were not stable they were not real. All men possessed certain unchanging characteristics in common, called human nature. And although there existed obvious differences between individuals, cultures, nations, the similarities between them were more extensive and important. The most important common characteristic was considered to be the possession of a faculty called reason, which enabled its possessor to perceive the truth, both theoretical and practical.⁹⁷

“The truth, it was assumed” Berlin continues, “was equally visible to all rational minds everywhere.”⁹⁸ It was also assumed that men, “who are, to some degree, free to choose between possibilities, do so for motives intelligible to themselves and others, and are, *pro tanto*, open to conviction by rational argument in reaching their decisions.”⁹⁹ For example, “However bitter the hatreds between Christians, Jews and Muslims, or between

⁹⁵ Berlin, *HI*, p. 74.

⁹⁶ Berlin, *PT*, p. 11.

⁹⁷ Berlin, *EUV*, p. 175. See also *TRR*, p. 171, *VHH*, pp. 54, 61, 106.

⁹⁸ Berlin, *EUV*, pp. 175-76.

⁹⁹ Berlin, *GS*, p. 323.

different sects within these faiths,” Berlin writes, “the argument for the extermination of heretics always rested on the belief that it was in principle possible to convert men to the truth, which was one and universal, that is, visible to all.”¹⁰⁰ While disagreements over the true ends of life often turned extremely violent, the assumption of a universal and rational human nature “made it not only necessary, but also reasonable, for human beings to attempt to communicate with each other, and to try to persuade one another of the truth of what they believed; and, in extreme cases, to inflict compulsion upon others.”¹⁰¹

Indeed, for Berlin, the very possibility of a democratic society relies on the rationalist or classical assumption that humans act as they do because of consciously held beliefs that may be changed by persuasion and argument.¹⁰² As he writes:

Democracy presupposes that every man is in principle capable of giving answers to personal and social questions which are as worthy of respect as any other man’s, that communication is possible between all men, or at least all men within a single society, because men are prepared to act on behalf of ideals and not merely be actuated by possibly unrecognized interests, and persuasion can be used to induce them to modify their present aims and recognize the value of those of others.¹⁰³

Democracy, in other words, presupposes what Berlin calls “positive” liberty, which “has to occur in all societies,” as he remarked to Beata Polanowska-Sygułska.¹⁰⁴ Berlin identifies positive liberty with Kant’s notion of being a self-determining, freely-choosing moral agent with the power to author one’s own actions.¹⁰⁵ Individuals become moral

¹⁰⁰ Berlin, *EUV*, p. 179.

¹⁰¹ Berlin, *EUV*, p. 176. See also p. 179.

¹⁰² Berlin, *PITC*, p. 366.

¹⁰³ Berlin, *DCI*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 16, *Dialogue*, p. 151. Berlin admitted that if he had to rewrite *TCL* today, he would be much kinder to positive liberty (*Dialogue*, p. 120).

¹⁰⁵ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 16;

beings, and cease to be “turnspit[s]”¹⁰⁶ or mere objects “actuated” by unconscious or irrational motives, passions, and interests, when they are able to make their own decisions on the basis of reasons and conscious purposes “as thinking, willing, active being[s], bearing responsibility for [their own] choices and...explain[ing] them by reference to [their] own ideas and purposes.”¹⁰⁷

If individuals’ conscious reasons, desires, and aspirations are ignored and they are manipulated as if they were “thing[s]” or “animal[s]” or “slave[s] incapable of playing a human role,”¹⁰⁸ then the path is open to Stalin’s “engineers of human souls,” who seek to “adjust” individuals to “the impersonal needs of society,” as if individuals were not moral agents but combinable, functional parts of one gigantic living “mechanism or organism.”¹⁰⁹ Since the creation of a smoothly-operating, well-adjusted social whole is the main goal of engineers of human souls, they must focus on “the elimination, or, at the very best, strong disapproval of those propensities for free inquiry and creation which cannot, without losing their nature, remain as conformist and law-abiding as the twentieth century demands.”¹¹⁰

The danger, Berlin thought in 1950, is that more and more humans, even in the non-totalitarian world, will allow “vast tracts of life to be controlled by persons who, whether consciously or not, act systematically to narrow the horizon of human activity to manageable proportions, to train human beings into more easily combinable parts—

¹⁰⁶ Berlin, *RR*, p. 75 and *Kant*, pp. 235-239.

¹⁰⁷ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁸ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ Berlin, *DCI*, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ Berlin, *PITC*, p. 375.

interchangeable, almost prefabricated—of a total pattern.”¹¹¹ Whereas a monist political philosopher such as Plato “at least conceded the reality of the painful problems, and merely denied the capacity of the majority to solve them,” the new totalitarian attitude is far more radical and dehumanizing because it “looks upon intellectual perplexity as being caused either by a technical problem to be settled in terms of practical policy, or else as a neurosis to be cured, that is made to disappear, if possible without a trace.”¹¹² It rests upon a policy of “deliberate psychological conditioning”¹¹³ which aims at “diminishing strife and misery by the atrophy of the faculties capable of causing them”¹¹⁴—namely the intellectual faculties that enable humans to resist totalitarian domination. This sort of tampering, thought control, and conditioning denies the function and value of the intellect and consequently the central monist assumption that (non-mentally deficient) humans can understand each other and be altered by rational argument. More than a denial of the pluralist idea of many ultimate ends, it “denies utterly the value of individual experience;”¹¹⁵ it is “a denial of that in men which makes them men and their values ultimate.”¹¹⁶ This attitude of complete unconcern for the conscious thoughts and ideals of individual human beings is, for Berlin, the main contribution of the twentieth-century to political thought, a contribution that created the great abyss dividing the twentieth century from all previous centuries.

¹¹¹ Berlin, *PITC*, p. 377.

¹¹² Berlin, *PITC*, p. 373. See also p. 376.

¹¹³ Berlin, *PITC*, p. 371.

¹¹⁴ Berlin, *PITC*, p. 375.

¹¹⁵ Berlin, *DCI*, pp. 1, 5.

¹¹⁶ Berlin, *TCL*, pp. 22-23.

Although Berlin does not explicitly reach the conclusion, as Arendt does, that the Western tradition of philosophy never had a concept of the political or a decent political philosophy, he too thinks that the rationalist theory of politics from Plato to Marx, despite its roots in natural law, usurped its own dignity in the twentieth-century insofar as it attended the rise of totalitarian societies in which political philosophy—defined as “an enquiry concerned not solely with elucidation of concepts, but with the critical examination of presuppositions and assumptions, and the questioning of the order of priorities and ultimate ends”—was rendered superfluous because “no serious questions about political ends or values could arise” in a society dominated and organized around one overriding goal or purpose.¹¹⁷ Or, as Arendt wrote in her *Denktagebuch* in 1950, “It is as though the final victory of philosophy would mean the final extermination of the philosophers.”¹¹⁸

Although Berlin feared the real possibility of the extermination of political philosophy in centrally managed, paternalistic western industrial societies, he remained optimistic about the future of political philosophy. “So long as rational curiosity exists—a desire for justification and explanation in terms of motives and reasons, and not only of causes or functional correlations or statistical probabilities,” Berlin wrote in the conclusion of “Does Political Theory Still Exist?”, “political theory will not wholly perish from the earth.”¹¹⁹

Overview

¹¹⁷ Berlin, *PT*, p. 8.

¹¹⁸ Arendt, *DI*, p. 43.

¹¹⁹ Berlin, *PT*, p. 33.

Chapter 1, “Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin’s ‘Monist’ Interpretation of the Western Tradition of Political Philosophy,” examines Arendt and Berlin’s construction of a “monist” tradition of political philosophy from Plato to Marx and their shared perception of the tradition’s immanent tendency toward totalitarian solutions. Arendt and Berlin both constructed their view of the tradition of political philosophy in the 1950s when it was widely assumed in America and England that political philosophy was a dead or dying subject. Arendt and Berlin themselves had left philosophy after their wartime experiences, and philosophers really were disengaged from the study of politics which was being taken up by the social and behavioral sciences. In this context their construction of a “monist” tradition can be seen as an account of what they left behind when they left philosophy and an explanation of why political philosophy seemed so dead. They both looked to Plato’s philosophy to understand political philosophy’s hostility toward politics and, as paradoxical as it may sound, toward political philosophy itself. They both identify the Platonic idea that through philosophy it is possible to discover the truth for man as such and to apply this truth to human affairs as harboring the seeds of twentieth-century totalitarian movements that sought to put an end to the sources of politics in human freedom and plurality. The solution for both of them was not to seek relief in the existentialist movement, which had abandoned philosophy for the sake of action, but to create a new political philosophy (in Arendt’s case) or to revitalize the old political philosophy (in Berlin’s).

Chapter 2, “In Meinecke’s Shadow: Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin’s Discovery of a ‘Pagan’ Machiavelli in Christian Europe,” looks at the way in which Arendt and

Berlin used Machiavelli to break free from the monist tradition with its hostility toward politics and political philosophy. I show that their “pagan” readings of Machiavelli are informed by the German historian Friedrich Meinecke’s influential book, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (1924), which took Machiavelli’s legendary “immoral” approach to the state and connected it to the First and, later, Second World Wars. Both Arendt and Berlin find in Machiavelli a vision of a glorious public political space or state that is so fundamentally at odds with our traditional Platonic and Christian view of politics and government as something we submit to as a necessary evil so we can live together in a community and spend our time pursuing nonpolitical activities and interests, that it requires us to think about politics and our Western way of life in a new way. Arendt uses Machiavelli’s political philosophy, especially his critique of Christianity, as an inspiration for her own efforts to think without a banister and for her articulation of the importance of *amor mundi*, love of the world, for politics. In her reading of Machiavelli we see her intention to theorize politics against the tradition as concerned with the world and not the self, with men in the plural and not man in the singular. Berlin, by contrast, finds Machiavelli’s pagan monism so at odds with the Platonic and Christian tradition that he adopts Meinecke’s view that Machiavelli’s heathen idealism of the state split the monist tradition in two, thereby raising the issue for us of the possibility of not just two but a plurality of incompatible but equally ultimate ways of life. We see in Berlin’s reading of Machiavelli his intention to take value pluralism seriously as against the monist tradition.

Chapter 3, “Pluralism Rules the Earth,” turns to Arendt and Berlin’s very different conceptions of human plurality or pluralism, which they take to be the necessary and sufficient conditions for politics and political philosophy. What is most striking about their different views of human plurality is that plurality/pluralism is intrinsically related to the existence of a universal or uniform human nature for Berlin, and the very absence or impossibility of such a thing for Arendt. This has significant implications for how they interpret the plurality-destroying evil of totalitarianism—or the other way around. It is not clear if dwelling on the horrors of totalitarianism led them to change or reassess their views about human plurality, or if their contemplation of human plurality led them to reassess their views about the horror of totalitarianism. In any case, for Berlin, totalitarianism strikes at the root of pluralism in our common human nature by dividing mankind into proper humans and expendable sub-humans. For Arendt, by contrast, totalitarianism threatens human plurality by attempting to construct one “man” out of a plurality of “men.” I contend that Arendt arrived at her particular concept of plurality after *Origins* in the course of further reflection on two questions: the question of the essence or nature of the totalitarian form of government as a form of government, and the question of the relationship between totalitarian rule and the Western tradition of political philosophy. In Berlin’s case I argue that his historically emergent romantic conception of pluralism, combined with his humanist view of the unity of mankind, ultimately leads him to classify totalitarianism as a form of anti-humanism, which he then attempts to combat by reaffirming the romantic humanist assumptions of the Western tradition.

Chapter 4, “A World Unhinged,” examines Arendt’s *The Human Condition* and Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty” in the context of the breakdown of the tradition and the ensuing postwar fear that the modern world has become unhinged from its past, deprived of stability and thrown into disorder. Arendt identifies the main symptom of the unhinging of the world as the popular belief in the 1950s that “man” was in crisis and needed to be changed. Retreating from the world into the self, human beings began to focus on adjusting their individual and social behavior rather than making adjustments to the world between them. To counteract this tendency, Arendt’s strategy in *The Human Condition* is not so much to focus on man as on the elementary articulations and activities of the human world that escape more and more of us so as to remind us of their importance in rendering the world a fit place for human habitation. Like Arendt, Berlin is critical of the zeitgeist of social adjustment in the early 1950s. Berlin highlights the disastrous political implications of what he calls “agoraphobia”—fear of the disordered freedom of the world beyond the walls of one’s tidy and orderly private life. When read in this context, I argue that Berlin’s concern in “Two Concepts of Liberty” with protecting a minimum area in private life for free action is meant to counter, and not exacerbate, the flight from the world. Berlin defends negative political liberty in order to protect not just man’s status as a free being, but the freedom of the artist, *engagé* rebel or existentialist.

CHAPTER 1

Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin's “Monist” Interpretation of the Western Tradition of Political Philosophy

In 1958 the political theorist Mulford Q. Sibley wrote that from the viewpoint of understanding politics a fact of “greatest significance” is that Plato and Aristotle laid down “the very notion of ‘scientific’ method in politics” by “suggesting that the apparently multifarious phenomena of political life are ‘tied together’ by underlying patterns or principles”—patterns which “have a metaphysical ‘reality’”—and that men can “know those patterns.”¹ While Sibley wrote this in defense of the place of Plato and Aristotle in the study of politics, both Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin write the same thing in their indictment of Plato and Aristotle and the tradition of political philosophy that they began. Both Arendt and Berlin refer to the Platonic idea that political life should be understood in the light of some metaphysical pattern or reality that ties everything together as “monism.” The topic of this chapter is the more or less explicit “monism” that both Arendt and Berlin identify as the central feature of the Western tradition and condemn for its dire effects on politics and political thought.

It is important to understand the context in which Arendt and Berlin were thinking and writing about monism. This context is the widespread conviction in the 1950s that in the aftermath of totalitarianism the wisdom or “old verities”² of the Western tradition of

¹ Mulford Q. Sibley, “The Place of Classical Political Theory in the Study of Politics: The Legitimate Spell of Plato,” in *Approaches to the Study of Politics*, ed. Ronald Young (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1958), p. 130.

² Arendt, *Lessing*, p. 11. See also Berlin, *Tolstoy*, p. 37.

political philosophy had broken down, forcing political philosophers and political theorists to find new solutions and new ways of thinking about the political predicaments of the time. In 1956, when the Cambridge historian of political theory Peter Laslett wrote in his editorial introduction to the first volume of *Philosophy, Politics and Society* that the “tradition” of philosophers applying their thought to “political and social relationships at the widest possible level of generality” was either “broken” or, perhaps, “about to be resumed,” but in any case it was “for the moment...dead,” he was expressing the general postwar diagnosis of the status of political philosophy in England and America.³ In the 1950s, reports of the decline and death of political philosophy were fueled by the increasing disengagement of philosophy from political studies. As Laslett observed, whereas in England, for over three centuries, philosophers “from Hobbes to Bosanquet” were concerned with the problems of social and political life, these problems were now being “taken over” by academic sociologists and other social scientists.⁴ From their point of view “politics [had] become too serious to be left to philosophers.”⁵

Even the philosophers themselves seemed eager to leave political questions for others to address. The “Logical Positivists” in England, Laslett claimed, had “convinced the philosophers that they must withdraw unto themselves for a time, and re-examine their logical and linguistic apparatus.”⁶ The *zeitgeist* of postwar British philosophy, as

³ Peter Laslett, “Introduction,” *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, ed. Laslett (New York: MacMillan, 1956), p. vii. For a different perspective on the marginal status of political philosophy in the late 1950s, see Brian Barry, “*Political Argument After Twenty-Five Years: An Introduction to the Reissue*,” *Political Argument: A Reissue with a New Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. xix-lxxii and Barry, “The Strange Death of Political Philosophy,” *Government and Opposition* 15:3/4 (Summer/Autumn 1980), pp. 276-88.

⁴ Laslett, “Introduction,” p. vii.

⁵ Laslett, “Introduction,” p. vii.

⁶ Laslett, “Introduction,” p. ix.

Berlin described it in 1949, was to consider “any problem the path to the solution of which could not even in principle be so much as indicated” as “not a genuine problem at all, but a mere verbal muddle to be cleared up.”⁷ In this spirit the logical positivists, by calling into question “the logical status of all ethical statements,”⁸ had a chilling effect on political philosophy, which was taught as a branch of ethics, especially at Oxford.⁹

Laslett’s announcement of the death of political philosophy in the 1950s thanks to Logical Positivism was always far-fetched and misleading, as Laslett himself acknowledged in the same introduction. Logical Positivism was not as “purely destructive” as its “critics” claimed.¹⁰ Rather than trying to shut down political philosophy, the linguistic philosophers, Laslett writes, were just trying to rope off the field as in urgent, but temporary, need of “examination and repair.”¹¹ They realized that they needed to develop a new philosophical attitude toward politics that would be “much modester and more realistic.”¹² There were genuine problems concerning the knot of collective life to be untied. Indeed, the birth of new political philosophies seemed “imminent.”¹³

And yet Laslett concluded in his final analysis that given the “new and peculiar” philosophical situation in which nobody could credibly claim the “prestige” of a political

⁷ Berlin, *ILAU*, p. 758.

⁸ Laslett, “Introduction,” p. ix. On the views of and debates among the logical positivists, see Ved Mehta, “A Battle Against the Bewitchment of Our Intelligence [1961],” in *A Ved Mehta Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 1-65 and Edmund Neill, “The Impact of Positivism: Academic Political Thought in Britain, c. 1945-1970,” *History of European Ideas* 39:1 (2013), pp. 51-78.

⁹ On the tradition of teaching of politics at Oxford up to 1950, see Malcolm Vout, “Oxford and the Emergence of Political Science in England 1945-1960,” in *Discourses on Society: The Shaping of the Social Science Disciplines*, eds. Peter Wagner, Björn Wittrock and Richard Whitley (Netherlands: Kluwer, 1991), pp. 163-191.

¹⁰ Laslett, “Introduction,” p. xiii.

¹¹ Laslett, “Introduction,” p. x.

¹² Laslett, “Introduction,” p. x.

¹³ Laslett, “Introduction,” p. xiv.

philosopher, it is better to pronounce the death of political philosophy than to proceed as if political philosophy of the traditional sort were still alive in the “clear, cold and hard” light of the mid-twentieth century.¹⁴ Not just Laslett, but Arendt, Berlin, and nearly everyone of their generation, felt that the old political and philosophical banisters, which only yesterday seemed so dependable, had failed in the experience of, and in the course of trying to come to terms with, the unprecedented horrors of Nazi totalitarianism.

Arendt’s postwar attitude to the status of political philosophy was close to that of Laslett’s. Speaking to the American Political Science Association in 1954 about the “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought,” Arendt noted the “fear” among philosophers “that such a thing as philosophy and philosophizing may not be possible and meaningful at all under the circumstances of the modern world,” a fear that had made concern with politics “a life-or-death matter for philosophy itself.”¹⁵ In several essays of the early 1950s, Arendt gives credit to the French existentialists (Sartre and Camus) for expressing the postwar feeling that contemporary political issues were too serious to be left to the philosophers, that the old tradition of political philosophy was dead, and that new “roads” and “paths” for philosophy needed to be laid down in “the spiritual and metaphysical desert of our time.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Laslett, “Introduction,” p. xiv.

¹⁵ Arendt, *CP*, p. 444.

¹⁶ Arendt, *Quest*, image 4, np. For an extended metaphorical discussion of totalitarianism in terms of desert conditions, see Arendt’s 1955 concluding remarks to her history of political theory class at Berkeley published as “Epilogue” in Arendt’s *The Promise of Politics*. Arendt took the metaphor of a desert world without paths from Jean-Paul Sartre. In her description of the world that emerged after the Second World War in her 1948 essay on the poet Bertolt Brecht, Arendt quotes from Sartre’s essay “What is Literature?”: “When the instruments are broken and unusable, when plans are blasted and effort is useless, the world appears with a childlike and terrible freshness, without support, without paths.” Jean-Paul Sartre, “What is Literature?” *Partisan Review* (January 1948), p. 30, quoted in Arendt, “Beyond Personal Frustration: The Poetry of Bertolt Brecht,” *Kenyon Review* 10:2 (Spring 1948), p. 310. In the revised and expanded version

As much as she admired the existentialist philosophers, however, Arendt could not travel with their movement. Arendt emphasizes in all of her essays on French existentialism that the existentialist philosophers were “tempted” into action as a “short cut” to escape from “the predicament of the philosopher” that had also become relevant to the masses after the war—i.e., the predicament of nihilism, the “absurd” (Camus) and “disgusting” (Sartre) givenness of the world,¹⁷ the “opaque, meaningless thereness” in which everything seems to exist, as Arendt put it in the Preface to *Men in Dark Times*.¹⁸ As Arendt wrote in an unpublished 1952 lecture, in response to the philosophical questions of life, death, and evil which affected everyone after the war, “Existentialism as a movement answers: Jump”—into “life as action” for Sartre, and into “being able to live” for Camus.¹⁹ Informed by the existentialists to some extent,²⁰ Arendt nonetheless

of her Brecht essay published in 1966 in *The New Yorker*, Arendt characterized the postwar world thus: “four years of destruction had wiped the world clean, the storms having swept along with them all human traces, everything one could hold on to, including cultural objects and moral values—the beaten paths of thought as well as firm standards of evaluation and solid guideposts for moral conduct. It was as though, fleetingly, the world had become so innocent and fresh as it was on the day of creation.” Arendt, *WPJ*, p. 239.

¹⁷ Arendt, *Quest*, image 4, n.p.

¹⁸ Arendt, “Preface” to *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harvest, 1968), p. vii.

¹⁹ Arendt, *Quest*, images 3-4, n.p.

²⁰ A student of Heidegger and Jaspers, Arendt was not only informed by the major sources of existentialism in the West—St. Augustine, Kierkegaard, Pascal, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky—she was also quite familiar with the lives and works of the existentialists of her generation, Camus, Sartre, Malraux, Fanon, Tillich. As a theorist of the human condition and human dignity, Arendt would seem to fit naturally among the existentialists who were critical of isms and of abstract philosophical thinking that had lost touch with living human experiences. The scholarship on Arendt’s existential values and outlook is instructive and useful but still more suggestive than definitive. See Martin Jay, “The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Assessments of Leading Political Philosophers. Vol III: The Human Condition*, ed. Garrath Williams (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 191-213; George Kateb, “Existential Values in Arendt’s Treatment of Evil and Morality,” in *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 342-373; Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, “Existentialism Politicized: Arendt’s Debt to Jaspers,” *The Review of Politics* 53:3 (Summer 1991), pp. 435-468; Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Waseem Yaqoob, “Reconciliation and Violence: Hannah Arendt on Historical Understanding,” *Modern Intellectual History* 11:2 (2014), pp. 385-416; Sonia Kruks, “‘Spaces of Freedom’: Materiality, Mediation and Direct Political Participation in the Work of Arendt and Sartre,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 5 (2006), pp. 469-91.

refused to escape from philosophy into action, calling instead for a new political philosophy. “An authentic political philosophy,” Arendt argued in her APSA lecture, cannot “arise out of rebellion against philosophy itself” but “can spring only from an original act of *thaumadzein* [i.e. philosophizing] whose wondering and hence questioning impulse must now (i.e., contrary to the teaching of the ancients) directly grasp the realm of human affairs and human deeds.”²¹

Berlin also refused to abandon philosophy, but his postwar attitude toward political philosophy differed from Laslett’s and Arendt’s. Berlin saw the philosophical scene in Europe in 1950 as bifurcated. On the one hand, “urgent preoccupation with the spectacle of approaching doom accompanied by a search for the means to avoid it” was taking precedence over “political philosophies,” which had come to seem “academic and obsolete.”²² On the other hand, in response to “harrowing moral experiences,” existentialist philosophers in France and Germany had found success by offering “relief” from “the sharp issues of the mounting crisis” through “elevation or immersion into a sphere above or below the terrors of daily life.”²³ He concluded his assessment of the year 1950 by claiming that the world was prepared for new turns in the development of art and all kinds of forms of thought, but their emergence seemed “so obstinately delayed

²¹ Arendt, *CP*, p. 445. By “human affairs” (Herodotus’ *ex anthropon genomena* and Plato’s *ta ton anthropon pragmata*), Arendt does not mean to include everything related to human life. Arendt follows the Greeks in thinking of the realm of human affairs as encompassing only those distinctively human achievements, the web of human relationships, that arise out of the political activities of action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*). Such achievements exclude “everything merely necessary or useful,” particularly labor (*HC*, p. 25. See also pp. 95, 183-84). For the Greeks, a defining feature of human affairs was their contingency: they could have been otherwise from what they turned out to be.

²² Berlin, *TEC*, pp. 23-24.

²³ Berlin, *TEC*, pp. 23-24.

everywhere.”²⁴ As the decade wore on, Berlin was asked by undergraduate societies to speak on the moribund state of political philosophy. “The subject [political philosophy] does need revitalizing,” Berlin wrote to his friend and philosopher Morton White in 1958. “[I]t is a sad thing that undergraduate societies constantly invite me to talk to them about why the subject is so dead.”²⁵

Berlin’s 1962 essay “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” constitutes his reply to the death-of-political-philosophy crowd.²⁶ The overall argument of the essay is a defense of the indispensability and fertility of what Berlin calls “traditional political theory” or “political philosophy in its traditional sense,” as against attempts to convert political theory into an “applied science.”²⁷ Berlin’s use of the language of “traditional” political philosophy, however, should not obscure the fact that he defends this sort of political philosophy *against* the monist tradition in Western philosophy stretching from Plato to Marx. He argues that this tradition is based on a false understanding of “what we mean by man.”²⁸ Or rather, Berlin argues that monism, like all attempts to translate political questions into scientific terms, is necessarily based on a model of what it means to be

²⁴ Berlin, *TEC*, p. 41.

²⁵ Quoted in Morton White, *A Philosopher’s Story* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 237.

²⁶ As with most of his essays, *PT* was an occasional piece written on invitation. The English essay is a revised and expanded version of the original French essay, “La théorie politique existe-t-elle?” *Revue Française de Science Politique* 11:2 (1961), pp. 309-337. Raymond Aron invited Berlin, along with the philosophers Eric Weil and Richard Wollheim, to write about “les relations entre philosophie et science ou entre théorie et études empiriques [the relationship between philosophy and science or between theory and empirical studies]” for a special issue of the *Revue Française de Science Politique* on political theory. Raymond Aron, “Préface” to the symposium on “La Théorie Politique” in the *Revue Française de Science Politique* 11:2 (June 1961), p. 266. Berlin met Aron in Paris in early April 1952, and was most impressed by him. See his letter to Vera Weizmann, April 10, 1952, *Enlightening*, p. 299. See also his letter to Sam Behrman, April 11, 1952, *Enlightening*, p. 301.

²⁷ Berlin, *PT*, pp. 7, 8, 11.

²⁸ Berlin, *PT*, p. 13. See also pp. 23-24.

human according to which “human ends are objective.”²⁹ Which is to say that “men are what they are, or change in accordance with discoverable laws; and their needs or interests or duties can be established by the correct (naturalistic, or transcendental, or theological) methods....[and we can] thereby establish what is good for men and how to effect this.”³⁰ For Berlin, the very notion that humans have one set of objective ends, values, needs, interests, etc., which can be known and predicted with certainty with the right method of investigation, fundamentally misunderstands human beings.

What humans are, Berlin argues, is one of the primary questions of political philosophy, and this question is not a question of fact and it cannot be answered by “discovering something which is what it is.”³¹ Drawing on Marxist understandings of humans as self-interpreting, self-transforming beings,³² Berlin argues that it is not possible to understand human actions without taking into account the beliefs that humans have about themselves and others.³³ Berlin calls these beliefs the “model,” “framework,”

²⁹ Berlin, *PT*, p. 12.

³⁰ Berlin, *PT*, p. 12.

³¹ Berlin, *PT*, p. 13.

³² See Berlin, *PT*, pp. 13, 24. As Berlin writes in his Marx book, although Marx accepts Hegel’s cosmic scheme of history, the ultimate forces at work for Marx are “human beings seeking intelligible human ends” in the pursuit of which “men transform themselves, so that the predicaments and the values which determine and explain the conduct of one group or generation or civilization to others who seek to understand it, themselves, in the course of their partial realization and inevitable partial frustration, alter the predicaments and values of their successors. This constant self-transformation, which is the heart of all work and all creation, renders absurd the very notion of fixed timeless principles, unalterable universal goals, and an eternal human predicament” (Berlin, *KM*, p. 94; see also *HSR*). We know that Berlin agrees with this general idea of humanity as a self-transforming species since he changed the words “their life as humans” in the first edition of *TCL* (p. 57), to “their life as unpredictably self-transforming human beings” in subsequent revised editions. For the revised version see Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 217.

³³ Although Berlin’s essay is widely cited, his view of political philosophy is not very well understood. This is in part due to the ambiguities in his use of the notions of “model” and “categories,” as David Oswald Thomas points out in his review of Berlin’s essay. See D. O. Thomas, “Political Philosophy Today,” *Philosophy* 40 (1965), pp. 162-64. For a good understanding of Berlin’s argument, see Richard J. Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), pp. 59-63 [the section on “Isaiah Berlin’s Critique of Empirical Theory”]. Berlin’s basic point is that in order to

and the “basic categories” in terms of which, not about which, human beings think and act, and it is the task of political theory to make such models and categories explicit so that they can be critically analyzed and evaluated.³⁴ More than half of *PT* (sections IV-VIII) is devoted to a complex explanation of the nature of political theory (which at one point turns into “the history of ideas”³⁵) as the critical study of the basic categories and conceptual frameworks that shape philosophical models and paradigms of political and social life. Berlin himself became a political theorist-cum-historian of ideas after he left linguistic philosophy by making his readers aware of the dangers of the “monist” model that, he argued, constitutes the central tradition in Western philosophy.

Isaiah Berlin: The Monist Conception of Society from Plato to Today

“The central thesis of Western philosophy from Plato to our day,” according to Berlin, is “monism.”³⁶ The reason Berlin uses the term “monism,” as we shall see, is that the term refers to a group of views within metaphysics that stress the oneness or unity of reality or mankind in some sense. “One of the central doctrines of the Western tradition, at any rate since Plato,” Berlin explains, “has maintained that the good is one, while evil has many faces; there is one true answer to every real question, but many false ones. . . . The central

understand the meaning of political events we have to understand “the ideas or attitudes to life involved in them, which alone make such movements a part of human history, and not mere natural events” (*TCL*, p. 6).

³⁴ Berlin, *PT*, p. 19. See also *PT*, pp. 16-17 and *Conversations*, pp. 46-47.

³⁵ Berlin, *PT*, p. 29.

³⁶ Berlin, *MIP*, p. 5.

current in ethics and politics, as well as metaphysics and theology and the sciences, is cast in a monist mould: it seeks to bring the many into a coherent, systematic unity.”³⁷

Berlin also refers to monism as the *philosophia perennis*, which he describes as roughly equivalent to the doctrine of “natural law” in all of its guises, “classical, medieval and modern.”³⁸ This doctrine derives from the ancient belief that human nature is what it is, namely universal and unchanging, and therefore “there is only one good for men.”³⁹ For monists, in other words, ethical and political questions about the human good have objective, true, universal answers that can be discovered by the correct method or by looking in the right place, at least in principle. If these answers are discovered they will “represent the final solution to all the problems of existence” and a perfect life on earth can be conceived and pursued.⁴⁰

Monism is a metaphysical doctrine. A metaphysical point of view, Berlin writes in “The End of the Ideal of the Perfect Society,” is a view “by which you penetrate through the curtain of appearances and you see the world to be a perfect harmony, and once you understand that this world is a perfect harmony, you understand exactly where you fit into it, and then you lead an entirely rational and frictionless life.”⁴¹ Further, Berlin explicitly acknowledges in his dialogue with Beata Polanowska-Sygulska that “if Socrates or Plato did not believe in a metaphysical insight into what things were, they would not believe in the absoluteness of values which the citizens of Athens appeared not always to be aware of, and which only teachers who had gone through the proper

³⁷ Berlin, *VHH*, p. 200.

³⁸ Berlin, *TRR*, p. 71. See also *TCE*, p. 1.

³⁹ Berlin, *NM*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ Berlin, *MIP*, p. 5.

⁴¹ Berlin, *EIPS*, n.p.

discipline could impart to them—or at least to the ‘Guardians’ into whose hands the government of the city must be entrusted, for they alone know.”⁴² The idea of absolute or certain knowledge derived from special insight into a reality beyond appearances is absolutely crucial to the monist worldview.

The monist worldview does not rest on facts or rational arguments that can be refuted by counter arguments or by the evidence of common sense. Monists are metaphysical thinkers, and metaphysical thinkers such as “Plato, Berkeley, Hegel, [and] Marx,” Berlin writes, “may use arguments—indeed they often do—but...their essential purpose is to expound an all-embracing conception of the world and man’s place and experience within it, they seek not so much to convince as to convert, to transform the vision of those whom they seek to address, so that they see the facts ‘in a new light’, ‘from a new angle’, in terms of a new pattern in which what had earlier seemed to be a casual amalgam of elements is presented as a systematic, interrelated unity.”⁴³ Such all-embracing conceptions are not based on or derived from facts or values; rather, they radically transform the way in which facts and values are viewed and thought.

Plato—and Aristotle?

Since monism is “deeply rooted in the Platonic tradition,”⁴⁴ and Plato was “the first coherent systematic monist,”⁴⁵ Berlin’s description of Plato’s vision of society is worth

⁴² Berlin, *Dialogue*, p. 56.

⁴³ Berlin, *JMOF*, pp. 161-62. See also *Turgenev*, p. 13: “...an all-embracing outlook, an ethical and metaphysical doctrine, a view of history and of man’s place in the cosmos, a vision that embraced all facts and all values.”

⁴⁴ Berlin, *ARW*, p. 208.

⁴⁵ Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 56.

quoting at length because it is the “Platonic ideal”⁴⁶ that serves for Berlin as the model of a monist conception of society:

If you read, say, the philosophy of Plato, you will find that he is dominated by a geometrical or mathematical model. It is clear that his thought operates on lines which are conditioned by the idea that there are certain axiomatic truths, adamant, unbreakable, from which it is possible by severe logic to deduce certain absolutely infallible conclusions; that it is possible to attain to this kind of absolute wisdom by a special method which he recommends; that there is such a thing as absolute knowledge to be obtained in the world, and if only we can attain to this absolute knowledge, of which geometry, indeed mathematics in general, is the nearest example, the most perfect paradigm, we can organize our lives in terms of this knowledge, in terms of these truths, once and for all, in a static manner, needing no further change; and then all suffering, all doubt, all ignorance, all forms of human vice and folly can be expected to disappear from the earth.⁴⁷

In other words, Plato conceives of organizing human society according to absolute knowledge of the truth, which supplies the final and permanent solution to the problems of human association. The Platonic ideal for Berlin thus consists of an unchanging, timeless pattern of life that human beings can look for, as for some buried treasure, by a special method, and those who are able to find and grasp it are the wise ones, the experts. If such a timeless pattern exists, then to the extent that the empirical world deviates from it, and people go about in ignorance doing whatever they wish, the world is a confused, foolish, and vicious place—a “distorted image or a feeble shadow” of the perfect pattern of life in which individuals would inhabit their proper place or function in society.⁴⁸

Although we might expect Berlin to cast Aristotle as a proto-pluralist or anti-monist thinker owing to his criticism of Plato’s ideal of a wholly unified city for, in

⁴⁶ Berlin, *POI*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Berlin, *RR*, p. 2. See also *BGI*, pp. 288-89. Arendt, too, writes that Plato “believed that mathematical truth opened the eyes of the mind to all truths.” Arendt, *Truth*, p. 230. See also *HC*, pp. 265-66.

⁴⁸ Berlin, *HI*, p. 17.

Berlin's words, failing to "allow for the variety of human characters and wishes,"⁴⁹ Berlin does not take Aristotle to be a pluralist who upholds the intrinsic value of human diversity and variety. Indeed, he thinks it would be anachronistic to do so. On Berlin's account of the history of political thought, the idea that variety is both a fact and a valuable attribute of human existence that should be encouraged and protected is a wholly modern idea that does not appear before the Romantic movement of the eighteenth-century and the thought of Vico and Herder.⁵⁰

As much as Aristotle (or Thucydides) may write about the variety of men and purposes in Athens, Berlin argues that there is a significant difference between living under a tolerant state like Athens during the Periclean age, and the modern (liberal) idea that all men possess "the *right* to individual activity, or a *right* not to be interfered with."⁵¹ In Berlin's view, both Plato and Aristotle conceive of individuals as belonging to, and under the unlimited authority of, the *polis*, as so many parts that belong and are subordinate to the ends and purposes of a whole. "It seems to me that among the Greeks," Berlin writes, "the polis gives and the polis takes away: it is the sole source of authority, or no doubt is itself obliged to live under some kind of unwritten eternal laws which Antigone talks about, [and] which the priests or legislators or immemorial custom protect."⁵² Berlin reads Aristotle as a biological teleologist who believes that human beings, and perhaps the entire universe, have a basic purpose created and implanted in them by nature, and this purpose determines the ends of human life and the goals of

⁴⁹ Berlin, *VHH*, p. 200.

⁵⁰ See Berlin, *Dialogue*, pp. 39-40, *VHH*, pp. 15-16, *EIPS*, n.p., *IWNG*, p. 97, *IWJV*, p. 9.

⁵¹ Letter to Leonard Woolf, July 8, 1959, *Enlightening*, p. 694, emphasis in original. See also *NM*, pp. 53-56, *BGI*, pp. 301-2 and *EIPS*, n.p.

⁵² Letter to Leonard Woolf, July 8, 1959, *Enlightening*, p. 694.

society.⁵³ Although Aristotle is more weary than Plato of too much uniformity in the city, both conceive of the *polis* as that which unifies individuals who are themselves treated as so many parts of a larger organic or otherwise harmonious whole. In short, “whatever the differences between Plato and Aristotle,” Berlin writes, “they and their disciples...were agreed that the study of reality by minds undeluded by appearances could reveal the correct ends to be pursued by men—that which would make men free and happy, strong and rational.”⁵⁴

The Monist Ideal of the Jigsaw Puzzle Solved

The metaphor Berlin frequently uses to sum up the monistic conception—life is a “jigsaw puzzle”—has two meanings, logical and metaphysical, and political.⁵⁵ First, monism is a metaphysical conception of the existence and fundamental priority of the whole to its parts. According to Berlin, the monist conception of human social life as admitting of a true ideal or final solution does not arise from our experience but is premised on the supposition, advanced in “books on logic,” that “one true proposition cannot be incompatible with another true proposition.”⁵⁶ When this logic is transposed to (or imposed on) matters of human experience and human values, it becomes the idea that not

⁵³ For Berlin’s reading of Aristotle, see *PT*, p. 14, *BGI*, p. 302, *CWJM*, *PAP*, *PIRA*, p. 97. For his critique of teleological thinking, see *HI*, pp. 13-19.

⁵⁴ Berlin, *NM*, p. 69. See also *BGI*, p. 295.

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Berlin, *PIRA*, pp. 48, 37, *HI*, p. 69, *HSR*, pp. 4, 11, *RR*, p. 23, *ARW*, p. 211, *NM*, p. 78, *POI*, p. 5.

⁵⁶ Berlin, *HSR*, p. 4. See also *HI*, p. 69. Bertrand Russell describes and criticizes this monist form of logic in “Mysticism and Logic” [1914], in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism and Other Essays 1914-19*, ed. John G. Slater (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 27-49. Surveying the state of monism in British philosophy in the early twentieth-century, C. E. M. Joad identifies one of the presuppositions of or paths to monism as the view that truth is coherent, that is, “that the criterion of truth is constituted by its coherence with the general mass of our other knowledge,” and this view “involves the conclusion that all knowledge is a single whole, and that truth is not attainable short of that whole.” Joad, “Monism in the Light of Recent Developments in Philosophy,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 17 (1916-17), p. 98.

truth but “reality” is “a coherent and harmonious whole,” and so “all conflict must ultimately be an illusion” since we know “on a priori grounds” that true reality is a perfect, harmonious whole.⁵⁷ This logic sustains the conviction that “all the positive values in which men have believed *must*, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another.”⁵⁸

In other words, monism is the *a priori* or metaphysical belief “that everything *must* come out well in the end like some immense puzzle of which we know that the parts must—have been created to—fit together, so that the miseries and evils of the world are no more than a passing phase.”⁵⁹ Of course, Berlin writes, “Whether we ever get to the goal of a perfect society, stable, unalterable, with all possible and actual human wishes totally satisfied in a harmonious manner, nobody can tell,” but the point for monists is that “it is not an absurd ideal. This is the ideal of the jigsaw puzzle solved.”⁶⁰ It was a vision of a solved puzzle that, according to Berlin, Tolstoy so desperately believed in and desired (but failed) to see⁶¹—the sight of “unity in the apparent variety of the mutually exclusive bits and pieces which composed the furniture of the world.”⁶² In the face of deviation from the correct path, of the empirical fact of pluralism, of the collision of ends, the monist says: “No matter that people differ so widely, that cultures differ, moral and political views differ; no matter that there is a vast variety of doctrines, religions, moralities, ideas—all the same there *must* somewhere be a true answer to the deepest

⁵⁷ Berlin, *PIRA*, p. 137.

⁵⁸ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 52, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Berlin, *PIRA*, p. 137, emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ Berlin, *RR*, p. 137. See also *POI*, p. 5.

⁶¹ Berlin, *Tolstoy*, pp. 3, 39-41, 71, 75.

⁶² Berlin, *Tolstoy*, pp. 36-37.

questions that preoccupy mankind.”⁶³ A monist, therefore, does not deny the existence of pluralism and conflict; a monist denies that such variety and conflict is fundamental and permanent.

Second, and most significantly, Berlin’s use of the metaphor of a jigsaw puzzle is probably meant to conjure up the menace of Communism in the 1950s. That is, it is not just possible, but highly likely, that Berlin took the metaphor from Arthur Koestler. On November 21, 1993, Stephen Spender wrote in his journal: “Isaiah suggested *The God that Failed* as a crucial [post-1945] book.”⁶⁴ Indeed, Berlin read *The God That Failed* soon after it was published in 1950, and described it in his essay on the cultural trends of 1950 as marking the beginning of a *Kulturkampf* (culture struggle) between two irreconcilable worlds, the West and Communist Russia. In 1950s America, Communism of course was seen as a menacing danger. In this context, Berlin wrote, the publication of *The God That Failed*, containing “the confessions of disillusioned ex-Communists,” including Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Richard Wright, André Gide, Louis Fischer and Spender himself, served less as entertainment for “a public avid for sensational revelations or hair-raising ‘inside stories’ as such” than as a guide to action for “readers to whom the energetic conspirators from whose midst came these eloquent ‘renegades’ still appeared as a very real and immediate menace.”⁶⁵ Berlin was one of those readers for

⁶³ Berlin, *MIP*, p. 7, emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Stephen Spender, *New Selected Journals 1939-1995*, eds. Lara Feigel and John Sutherland with Natasha Spender (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 706.

⁶⁵ Berlin, *TEC*, p. 19.

whom the Communists were “a *sui generis* totalitarian group with ideals in absolute conflict with those of liberals and democrats of every shade and hue.”⁶⁶

In *The God That Failed* Koestler describes the effect of converting to Communism as follows:

The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull; the whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There is now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past—a past already remote, when one had lived in dismal ignorance in the tasteless, colorless world of those who *don't know*.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Berlin, *TEC*, p. 19.

⁶⁷ Arthur Koestler, *The God That Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman, with a new foreword by David C. Engerman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001 [1950]), p. 23, emphasis in original. Berlin was close to Arthur Koestler. From the British Embassy in Washington on June 7, 1945, Berlin wrote to Maurice Bowra that Koestler “is regarded by some here as the greatest genius of our age” (Letter to Maurice Bowra, June 7, 1945, *Enlightening*, p. 579). Arendt, interestingly enough, began her 1945-46 *Commentary* review of Koestler’s play *Twilight Bar* and collection of essays *The Yogi and the Commissar* by saying: “Without a doubt Koestler belongs among the best reporters of our time.” Arendt, “The Too Ambitious Reporter,” in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 130. Arendt’s review was originally published in *Commentary* 1 (1945-46), pp. 94-95. Berlin read many of Koestler’s works, including his novels *Darkness at Noon* (1941) and *Thieves in the Night* (1946), his essay in *The God That Failed* (1950), and *The Sleepwalkers* (1959), his study of the history of astronomy and cosmology. See Berlin’s letter to Philip Graham, November 14, 1946, *Enlightening*, p. 21 and his letter to Morton White, February 6, 1959, *Enlightening*, pp. 673-74.

To be sure, Berlin publicly disagreed with Koestler in 1950-51 over whether Jews should immigrate to Israel, but the two men did not see themselves as enemies, which is unfortunately the way their relationship has been framed in the scholarly literature. For this antagonistic framing, see Bernard Wasserstein, “Isaiah Berlin, Isaac Deutscher and Arthur Koestler: Their Jewish Wars,” *Menasseh ben Israel Instituut Studies* nr. 2 (Amsterdam: Menasseh ben Israel Instituut, 2009), pp. 1-29 and Arie Dubnov, “Between Liberalism and Jewish Nationalism: Young Isaiah Berlin on the Road Towards Diaspora Zionism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 4:2 (2007), pp. 303-326. Joshua Cherniss claims that Berlin “kept his distance” from Koestler and cites only an unpublished letter dated November 1, 1949, from George Fischer to Berlin as evidence that “Berlin found Koestler’s much-lauded *Darkness at Noon* ‘morally askew’.” Cherniss, *A Mind and Its Time*, p. 75.

In the fall of 1954 Berlin and Koestler met in person and discussed the State of Israel, and corresponded with each other in November of that year. Koestler wrote to Berlin on November 16 to get the bibliographical information for Berlin’s “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation” essay and to ask Berlin if he could use it as a basis for further discussion. In his reply of November 18, Berlin gave him the publication details of his essay and mentioned an article written by Milton Himmelfarb in *Commentary* in which he, Berlin, amusingly found himself “regarded as your direct disciple, though somewhat milder in my views and more cautious, but holding an identical position with you as against that of the writer” (Berlin, “Supplementary Letters 1946-1960,” *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, ed. Henry Hardy. <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/published_works/e/12supp.pdf>, p. 14).

Finding Berlin’s essay attacking him “truly admirable,” Koestler wrote again to Berlin on November 25, 1954: “I feel that the difference in our approaches is small” (Quoted in Berlin,

As Berlin emphasizes, especially with respect to Communist and Socialist leaders (he names Lenin, Trotsky, Mao and Pol Pot), if “I *know* the only true path to the ultimate solution of the problem of society,” if “I *know* which way to drive the human caravan,” then “I *know* what you need, what all men need,” and “surely no cost would be too high to obtain it.”⁶⁸ The justification of overcoming all resistance at any price is always: “To make such an omelet, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken.”⁶⁹ For Berlin it is Marxism in particular that has “inured us, to our doom as some would say, to the need to break eggs, however sacred, for the sake of various social omelets.”⁷⁰

For Arendt, to be told that “you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs” is simply to be told that the end justifies the means, and “despite its obvious fallacy”—i.e., that I can know the end and can decide about the means as if I were building a house out of wood—“the doctrine...has a dangerous attraction for all of us because it is so deeply embedded in our whole tradition of political thought.”⁷¹ Arendt, who wrote her dissertation on St. Augustine, explains this doctrine in terms of Augustine’s idea of an absolutely transcendent *summum bonum* (highest good). As the one and only good that is to be enjoyed for its own sake as an end in itself, and not a means to an end, the *summum bonum* can structure all other *bona* in a hierarchy and become “the chief criterion, the

“Supplementary Letters 1946-1960,” p. 15). For Berlin’s view of his differences with Koestler with respect to the question of Jewish assimilation, see his letter to Douglas Viliers, July 11, 1973, *Building*, pp. 538-39.

⁶⁸ Berlin, *POI*, p. 13, emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Berlin, *POI*, p. 13. See also his letter to Kenneth Tynan, April 26, 1961, *Building*, p. 35.

⁷⁰ Berlin, *MINC*, p. 162.

⁷¹ Arendt, *EC*, p. 395.

standard of all actions and judgments.”⁷² When the *summum bonum* is conceived as an end that transcends all actions, like “the good life,” then the point is that when society is conceived as existing in the service of such an end, the realm of politics as such, “human action itself,” is reduced to the status of “a means to an end which transcends it.”⁷³ If the end is not transcendent but political, like “a classless society or a race society,” and if I believe I *know* the end and can make it, then human action is reduced not just to a means to an end, but to a process of fabricating or making the end by the necessary instruments and means.⁷⁴ It is the belief that a political, as opposed to a transcendent, end can be made by certain means that leads to the totalitarian breaking of eggs. It is in this sense that we should take Arendt’s statement in *The Human Condition* that “as long as we believe that we deal with ends and means in the political realm, we shall not be able to prevent anybody’s using all means to pursue recognized ends.”⁷⁵

Berlin makes the same point in different terms: “If we could construct a society in which it was believed universally . . . that there was only one overriding human purpose . . . then plainly all that would matter would be to find the right roads to the attainment of the universally accepted end.”⁷⁶ Of course there will be disagreements about what the overriding human purpose or *summum bonum* is and how to specify it, but as Berlin will emphasize, in a society or situation where the *summum bonum* simply commands and organizes all other *bona*, there is no place for political philosophy because there is no place for debate and discussion about what *bona* (“values” in Berlin’s terminology)

⁷² Arendt, *EC*, p. 395.

⁷³ Arendt, *EC*, p. 395.

⁷⁴ Arendt, *EC*, p. 396.

⁷⁵ Arendt, *HC*, p. 229.

⁷⁶ Berlin, *PT*, p. 9.

should be pursued, how far, and so on. There is no place for political philosophy, in Berlin's view, where a single goal or end is universally accepted or posited and the only thing to discuss is the means to achieve it, which is the business of Platonic or Communists experts.⁷⁷

Applied Monism, or The Vivisection of Living Human Beings

Most importantly, the point of Berlin's conception of monism is to show that if political questions are assumed to have objectively true answers than can in principle be discovered by the correct method and are, from an analogy with logic, assumed to form a perfect harmonious way of life, then the most terrible crimes can be justified in the name of eliminating all obstacles in the way of the pursuit of the ideal. And the main "obstacle" to such endeavors, Berlin argues, is the very thing that makes us human beings—our ability to choose and pursue a plurality of ideals and purposes which presupposes not one truth path but "the perpetual opening of new paths of action."⁷⁸ In order to pursue and realize some monist ideal, as Berlin writes in several essays, living human beings must be "vivisected"—a medical procedure that is tantamount to a form of torture when practiced on humans—into neat and tidy shapes "in order that there might be no disharmonies and collisions, and variety be replaced by uniformity, and individual differences by a single world-embracing discipline."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Berlin, *PT*, p. 10.

⁷⁸ Berlin, *PT*, p. 13.

⁷⁹ Berlin, *SR*, p. 73. See also *SR*, p. 52, *TCL*, p. 56, *FIB*, p. 27.

While it is impossible to prove that Berlin picked up his language of “the vivisection of living human beings”⁸⁰ from Koestler, he employs it with the meaning that Koestler gives it in a passage from *Darkness at Noon* that distinguishes between two conceptions of ethics:

One of them, Christian and humane, declares the individual to be sacrosanct, and asserts that the rules of arithmetic are not to be applied to human units. The other starts from the basic principle that a collective aim justifies all means, and not only allows, but demands, that the individual should in every way be subordinated and sacrificed to the community—which may dispose of him as a laboratory rabbit or a sacrificial lamb. The first conception could be called antivivisection morality; the second, vivisection morality.⁸¹

Whether influenced by this passage or not, Berlin thought of monism as leading to fanatical revolutionaries seeking to impose their metaphysical vision on human beings “by violent vivisection [—] unconcerned with the actual needs of actual persons—in the name of which the revolutionary leaders kill and torture with a quiet conscience, because they know that this and this alone is—must be—the solution to all social and political and personal ills.”⁸² Berlin thus leaves us with the image of living human beings being cut up and tortured by revolutionary leaders too obsessed by their monist vision of social harmony and perfection to try to understand actual human needs.

The pathos of Berlin’s writings on monism comes from his conviction that where men are certain that they know that perfection can be reached, they will kill with a clear conscience to reach it. As Berlin said to Ramin Jahanbegloo, there is “nothing more

⁸⁰ Letter to Elena Levin, November 30, 1954, *Enlightening*, p. 454.

⁸¹ Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, trans Daphne Hardy (New York: Bantam Books, 1968) p. 137, quoted in Alain Finkielkraut, *In the Name of Humanity: Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001), p. 56. Daphne Hardy’s translation was originally published in England in 1941.

⁸² Berlin, *HBIL*, p. 101. See also *TCL*, p. 56, *MH*, p. 209, *PJ*, p. 52, *PGR*, p. 73, *FIB*, p. 27, *LOMH*, p. 250.

destructive of human lives than fanatical conviction about the perfect life, allied to political or military power.”⁸³ For Berlin, then, the concept of a monist society is useful because it draws our attention to the way in which the philosophical search for a metaphysical vision of “the victorious perfection of true reality”⁸⁴ has been inspired by, or has lead to, hostility toward human affairs. As Berlin wrote to Koestler on November 30, 1954: “I am daily becoming more and more obscurantist and cling to Kant’s proposition that ‘Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.’ The obscurantist bit is that I shall go further and say ‘and should not be made either’.”⁸⁵

Hannah Arendt: Plato, Philosophy, and Politics

Like Isaiah Berlin, Arendt argues that our tradition of political philosophy began with Plato’s political philosophy and we “have grown up in the consequences of the Platonic tradition,” which has shaped how we think about and view politics.⁸⁶ The wind of Plato’s thought, she once wrote, “still sweeps toward us after thousands of years.”⁸⁷ As important as Plato’s outlook is for Berlin as a paradigmatic example of monism, Plato is much more important for Arendt. For Arendt, the Western tradition of political philosophy was literally born from Plato’s conception of politics as a necessary evil, an activity that humans are forced into only because they are mortal and depend on each other for mere life and survival.

⁸³ Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 47. See also *POI* and “A Message to the 21st Century,” *New York Review of Books* (October 23, 2014), p. 37.

⁸⁴ Berlin, *PIRA*, p. 137.

⁸⁵ Berlin, “Supplementary Letters 1946-1960,” p. 15.

⁸⁶ Arendt, *Socrates*, p. 10. See also *KMPT*, p. 294.

⁸⁷ Arendt, *Heidegger*, p. 303.

Because the terms “philosophy” and “political philosophy” as Arendt uses them name distinct but related phenomenon, I do not use them interchangeably. One of the goals of Arendt’s analysis of Plato is to argue that (and explain how and why) Plato turned from “philosophy” to “political philosophy.” In order to understand our tradition of political philosophy, Arendt devotes a great deal of her efforts to uncovering the origins of Plato’s “philosophy,” which she traces back to Homer, and the origins of Plato’s later “political philosophy,” which she traces to his response to the trial and death of Socrates in 4th BCE Athens. The motivation behind her distinction between Plato’s philosophy and his political philosophy came from her insight—derived from Heidegger’s essay on truth in Plato’s cave allegory and expressed succinctly in her letter to Karl Jaspers on July 1, 1956—that “Plato wanted to ‘apply’ his own theory of ideas to politics, *even though that theory had very different origins.*”⁸⁸ Thus to understand how Arendt arrived at her understanding of the Western tradition of “political philosophy” we must start with Arendt’s account of the origins of Plato’s “philosophy” before turning to her interpretation of Plato’s “political philosophy” as the application of his philosophy to politics.

The Pathos of Wonder

According to Arendt, Plato was not a political philosopher at the beginning of his writing life but a philosopher, and not the first Greek philosopher but one of the last.⁸⁹ Though a Greek, he was a not a typical Greek philosopher. In contrast to the pre-philosophic and

⁸⁸ Letter to Jaspers, July 1, 1956, *HAKJ*, p. 288, my emphasis. Arendt acknowledges her debt to Heidegger in this letter to Jaspers as well as in an earlier letter to Heidegger, May 8, 1954, *Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger: Letters 1925-1975*, ed. Ursula Ludz, trans. Andrew Shields (New York: Harcourt, 2004), pp. 120-21.

⁸⁹ See Arendt, *KMPT*, p. 280.

philosophic Greek assumptions about the origins of philosophy in the desire to immortalize (*athanatizein*), Plato wrote in the *Theaetetus* that “the passion (*pathos*) of the philosopher [is] to wonder (*thaumazein*). There is no other beginning and principle (*arche*) of philosophy than this one.”⁹⁰ Arendt adds: “this wonder is in no way connected with the quest for immortality.”⁹¹ Plato and Aristotle⁹² take the *pathos* of wonder to be the beginning of philosophy, a move that distinguishes them from “all former philosophies.”⁹³

Arendt consistently refers to Plato and Aristotle as “the Socratic school,” and not just because Socrates was their teacher. It was Socrates who, Arendt surmises, must have seemed, at least to Plato, to display the *pathos* of wonder when he “would suddenly, as though seized by a rapture, fall into complete motionlessness, just staring without seeing or hearing anything”⁹⁴—staring not with the eyes of his body but with the eye of the mind, “for which the deliberate closing your eyes to what is present and visible is a kind

⁹⁰ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 142, quoting Plato’s *Theaetetus* 155d.

⁹¹ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 141.

⁹² Aristotle wrote in *Metaphysics* (982b11-22): “For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the genesis of the universe. And a man who is puzzled [*aporein*] and wonders thinks himself ignorant...therefore since they philosophized in order to escape from ignorance, evidently they were pursuing science [*episteme*] in order to know, and not for any utilitarian end.” Quoted from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 692, Greek words in brackets are Arendt’s from *WIPP*, image 1, p. 024415. Arendt recognizes that, in contrast to Plato, Aristotle interprets wonder as *aporein* and says that philosophy is the beginning of science (*episteme*), which aims at replacing ignorance with knowledge (see also *HC*, p. 302n67). Yet Arendt insists on the validity of grouping Aristotle with Plato since Aristotle also believes that this enterprise is useless, and that it could never really come to an end since he says in the *Politics* that the contemplative life (*bios theoretikos*) is the best sort of life. In her 1973 remarks to the Princeton Advisory Council, Arendt reaffirmed her view that Platonic wonder, “Aristotle notwithstanding, is not caused by ignorance and does not disappear with knowledge” (*Princeton*, p. 3). Both Plato and Aristotle agree that what is most worthwhile to learn about is not human affairs but the “greater matters” of the universe.

⁹³ Arendt, *PP*, p. 98.

⁹⁴ Arendt, *PP*, p. 98. See also *HC*, p. 302.

of condition sine qua non.”⁹⁵ And before the example of Socrates there was Homer’s blindness, Arendt notes, which “has always been a symbol for the concentrated attention upon things absent, things remembered and seen with the eye of the mind.”⁹⁶ In this rapturous solitary condition, Socrates, Arendt suggests, may have been the first to discover “the eternal” or “the miracle of Being” as the object of philosophic contemplation (*theoria*).⁹⁷

Etymologically, Arendt notes, Plato’s word for wonder, *thaumazein*, comes from Homer. It is derived from *theasthai*, the Greek word for “beholding,” and carries the connotation of an *admiring* wonder at divinities or divine matters.⁹⁸ In Homer, men were struck with admiring wonder when a god, or godlike man, appeared.⁹⁹ The Greeks believed that all humans are partly divine and as such are capable of an “aboriginal wonder”¹⁰⁰ at the divine, but it is the mark of a philosopher to endure this wonder rather than flee from it or form an opinion, *doxadzein*, which is the opposite of *thaumazein*.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Arendt, *WIPP*, image 22, p. 024434.

⁹⁶ Arendt, *WIPP*, image 22, p. 024434.

⁹⁷ Arendt, *HC*, pp. 20, 302. *Theoria* is best understood as referring to the decisive discovery of the ancient Greeks of a human faculty of contemplating the eternal order of the *kosmos* (see Arendt, *KMPT*, p. 287; *HC*, pp. 16, 278, 301). The Greek word *theoria* derives from *theoros*, “spectator,” and refers to a theoretical or contemplative perspective on the world as opposed to the perspective of an active participant. Arendt comes close to identifying *theoria* with what she calls “thinking,” which is a resultless, non-cognitive mode of “thinking” about something. *Theoria* and “thinking” are identical for Arendt in the sense that both need to be distinguished from means-end “deliberation,” or what Hobbes calls “reckoning with consequences,” and from various forms of “cognition” or “knowing,” such as science, which aim at “knowledge” or “know-how.” *Theoria*, however, is a more specialized sense of “thinking” because it has a specific beginning (in wonder) and specific object (the eternal or Being) (see *HC*, p. 302). While everybody has the faculty of *theoria*, only the philosopher attempts to make a way of life out of its activity, a way of life that Plato and Aristotle considered the happiest and most perfect form of human existence. For an excellent discussion of *theoria*, see Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Nightingale, “On Wandering and Wondering: ‘Theoria’ in Greek Philosophy and Culture,” *Arion* 9:2 (Fall 2001), pp. 23-58.

⁹⁸ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 142.

⁹⁹ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 142.

¹⁰⁰ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 137.

¹⁰¹ Arendt, *PP*, p. 99. See also *Thinking*, p. 98.

What exactly is wonder directed at or what initially arouses it? Plato cannot tell us, Arendt claims, because it is ineffable;¹⁰² it is “a truth that is *arrheton*, incapable of being communicated through words, as Plato put it, or beyond speech, as in Aristotle.”¹⁰³ Plato seems to say as much in the *Seventh Letter*: “it is altogether impossible to talk about this [philosophy’s object] as about other things we learn; rather, from much being together with it...a light is lit as from a flying fire.”¹⁰⁴ This claim is significant for Arendt because it tells us that whatever wonder is directed at, it is evidently impossible to put into reasoned speech (*logos*). In her earliest essay that discusses this object of wonder, “Philosophy and Politics” (1954), Arendt adopted Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the experience of wonder as “the experience of no-thing, of nothingness.”¹⁰⁵ And this experience manifests itself in the form of the asking of unanswerable, ultimate questions: “What is being? Who is man? What meaning has life? What is death? etc.”¹⁰⁶ But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Arendt returned to the question of the object of the experience of wonder in *Thinking*, she took her cue not from Kierkegaard but from Homer and (following the lead of Heidegger) the pre-Socratics, including Parmenides, Anaxagoras, and Heraclitus.

According to Arendt’s reading of Anaxagoras, what appears and arouses wonder is “a glimpse of the non-revealed.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Heraclitus on Arendt’s account speaks of

¹⁰² See Arendt, *HC*, p. 302, *Thinking*, p. 143, *PP*, p. 97, *Socrates*, p. 32.

¹⁰³ Arendt, *HC*, p. 291.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Arendt, *PP*, p. 97.

¹⁰⁵ Arendt, *PP*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁶ Arendt, *PP*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁷ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 143.

the “non-visible harmony” which is “better than the visible.”¹⁰⁸ The invisible harmony is not nothingness, as Arendt had once thought. On the contrary, it is what Parmenides calls *Being*, “the old *hen pan*, ‘the all is one’.”¹⁰⁹ Arendt interprets these pre-Socratics as saying that “Philosophy begins with an awareness of this invisible harmonious order of the *kosmos*, which is manifest in the midst of the familiar visibilities as though these had become transparent.”¹¹⁰ In other words, the philosopher must withdraw or absent himself temporarily from everyday life in order to make present what is visible only to the mind, which is never “anything particular but is...*the whole*.”¹¹¹ What Arendt finds so remarkable in the philosophy of the pre-Socratics and the Socratic School is this “implicit monism, the claim that behind the obvious multiplicity of the world’s appearances...there must exist a oneness.”¹¹² Unlike Berlin, Arendt focuses on the nature of the “special method” (which Berlin describes as a “metaphysical” or “magical” eye¹¹³) for perceiving this implicit monism behind the world’s appearances.

The Magical Eye of Philosophy

For Arendt, that activity of beholding a harmonious oneness has its origin in Homer’s *noos*, the organ of invisible thoughts and clear notions.¹¹⁴ *Nous* is Aristotle’s term for the faculty in the soul or the mind that enables one to behold the unity that is the object of *thaumazein*. *Nous* for Aristotle is another word for *theoria*, as both refer to the human

¹⁰⁸ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 143.

¹⁰⁹ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 70. See also p. 108.

¹¹⁰ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 143.

¹¹¹ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 144, emphasis added.

¹¹² Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 70.

¹¹³ Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 32.

¹¹⁴ For more on Homer’s *noos*, see Arendt, *WIPP*, image 15, p. 024427.

capacity of contemplation.¹¹⁵ Plato's phrase for this faculty is *amna tes psyches*, "the eye of the soul [*psyche*]." This faculty is as invisible as what it perceives: Parmenides' *hen pan*, Heraclitus's *kosmos* and *koinos logos*, or Plato's *eidos*. As Arendt explains, Plato connected "an invisible organ in man, the soul, with something invisible present in the world of invisibles, the ideas."¹¹⁶

Despite Arendt's claim that Plato does not specify the object of *thaumazein*, it seems obvious that it is identical to the object of *theoria*, *nous*, or the eye of the soul: eternal being or Plato's eternal "ideas" or *eidos*.¹¹⁷ According to Arendt, Plato's ideas originally pertained to "the quest for the 'true being of things,'" the quest "to contemplate the true essence of Being."¹¹⁸ In his philosophical works, such as the *Symposium*, Plato defines the ideas "as that whose appearance illuminates."¹¹⁹ They are described "as what 'shines forth most' (*ekphanestaton*) and therefore as variations of the beautiful."¹²⁰ The highest idea, or "idea of ideas," for the philosopher is the beautiful, and the philosopher, Arendt writes, "even in the *Republic*," at least until Book VI, "is still defined as a lover of beauty."¹²¹ The philosopher understood the beautiful on the analogy of the sun because it shines forth and illuminates the essence of everything. What the philosopher finds in the clear sky of ideas, then, Arendt writes, are "the eternal essences of perishable things and of mortal men illuminated by the sun [i.e. the beautiful], the idea of ideas, which enables

¹¹⁵ Arendt, *HC*, p. 27.

¹¹⁶ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 104.

¹¹⁷ It turns out that Arendt says in *The Human Condition* that "*Theoria*, in fact, is only another word for *thaumadzein*; the contemplation of truth at which the philosopher ultimately arrives is the philosophically purified speechless wonder with which he began" (*HC*, p. 302). See also *HC*, p. 266.

¹¹⁸ Arendt, *Authority*, pp. 113, 109.

¹¹⁹ Arendt, *PP*, p. 77.

¹²⁰ Arendt, *HC*, p. 225.

¹²¹ Arendt, *HC*, p. 226.

the beholder to see and the ideas to shine forth.”¹²² With respect to human affairs, the effect of beholding the ideas was originally to illuminate or intensify their darkness.¹²³ It should now be clear that, for Arendt, Plato’s doctrine of ideas (*eidōs*) was not originally a concept of standards and measures to be applied to human action, as it was to become in his political philosophy, but pertained “exclusively to philosophy, the experience of contemplation, and the quest for the ‘true being of things.’”¹²⁴

The point, in sum, of Arendt’s tracing of Plato’s philosophy back to its origins is to show that the original object of philosophy is not politics or human affairs but an everlasting invisible pattern or oneness that transcends the political realm. It is a feature of this original one that it is everlasting, cannot be otherwise, and cannot not exist, and so it excludes by definition all matters concerning human affairs, which are not everlasting but contingent and pass in and out of existence.¹²⁵ This oneness gives rise to admiring wonder and sets the philosopher thinking about eternal being, the everlasting, the divine, the eternal ideas. “From this,” Arendt writes toward the end of her discussion of *thaumazein*, “it should be obvious that the wonder that befalls the philosopher can never concern anything particular but is always aroused by the whole, which, in contrast to the sum total of entities, is never manifest.”¹²⁶ This Platonic tradition echoes through the history of philosophy up to and including Hegel, for whom “Philosophy deals with the

¹²² Arendt, *PP*, p. 95.

¹²³ Arendt, *Authority*, pp. 112-13.

¹²⁴ Arendt, *Authority*, p. 113.

¹²⁵ See Arendt, *Thinking*, pp. 136-139.

¹²⁶ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 144.

particulars as parts of a whole, and the whole is the system, a product of speculative thought.”¹²⁷

**From Philosophy to Political Philosophy:
Arendt’s Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy**

In the light of Arendt’s account of the origins of Plato’s philosophy, she hardly needs to remind us that “concern with politics is not a matter of course for the philosopher.”¹²⁸ In the course of philosophy’s history, Arendt observes, only disturbing political events and experiences have compelled philosophers to take politics seriously, at least so far as their own livelihood was at stake. Plato was compelled to apply his philosophy to politics, Arendt argues, as the result of the trial and death of Socrates and the incipient decay of the *polis*. From Plato’s perspective, according to Arendt, what befell Socrates was not just an “accident,”¹²⁹ as Socrates might have thought, but revealed a conflict between philosophy and politics. With the death of Socrates, Arendt argues, the question of the possibility and meaning of philosophy in the *polis* became a life or death issue for Plato, and so out of a concern for “self-protection” he became concerned with politics.¹³⁰ “Plato talked back [to the *polis*],” Arendt writes, “and what he had to say was so powerful that we have measured against it everything that has been said on this subject since.”¹³¹ At the heart of Plato’s political philosophy, Arendt argues, is a deeply hostile attitude toward the political realm, an attitude that our tradition of political thought preserved and

¹²⁷ Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 91.

¹²⁸ Arendt, *CP*, p. 428.

¹²⁹ Arendt, *CD*, p. 58.

¹³⁰ Arendt, *CP*, p. 428.

¹³¹ Letter to Karl Jaspers, July 1, 1956, *HAKJ*, p. 289.

perpetuated for two and a half thousand years in the idea of the statesman as a ruler or lawgiver and politics as an art of measurement or navigation.¹³²

Arendt maintains that Plato's political philosophy had its origin in his desire—formed as a consequence of his experience of the trial and death of Socrates—to apply his philosophical truths to the realm of politics by translating them into human laws and rules. From the perspective of, and in contrast to, the life of Socrates, Plato's desire to apply philosophical truth to politics may appear as a betrayal of Socrates's search for truth in opinions by talking something through with individual citizens (*dialegesthai* or *maieutic*) in the public spaces of Athens. From this perspective, Plato appears to enact, among other things, a radical separation between truth and opinion, philosophy and politics, whereas Socrates sought to combine philosophy and politics in his endeavor to find truth in opinion. While there is much to be said for this perspective on Plato's turn to politics, a perspective which focuses on the anti-Socratic conclusions that Plato drew from Socrates's death,¹³³ there is another perspective in Arendt's writings on philosophy—or at least a dimension of the foregoing perspective whose importance for understanding the Socratic School tends to be overlooked.

This dimension comes into focus when Arendt examines Plato's political philosophy from the perspective of the many in the *polis*. When Arendt writes from this

¹³² Arendt, *PP*, p. 92, *TMA*, p. 17, *KMPT*, p. 312, *TPT*, p. 47.

¹³³ These conclusions are as follows: that Socrates' method of philosophizing through ordinary speech (*logos*) and dialogue (*dialegesthai*), a method which takes opinions (*doxa*) seriously as truth-disclosing, is inadequate for beholding and expressing philosophical truth; that persuasion and argument are not effective means for compelling others to adhere to philosophical truth; and that the *polis* has proven a threat to the life of the philosopher who inevitably appears in and to it as someone who has intercourse with invisible, eternal things and is therefore an expert in truths that are good for nobody on earth, not even the philosopher himself. Arendt then interprets Plato's philosophy, especially the *Republic*, as a positive attempt to address these problems with Socrates's way of philosophizing so that philosophers would be able to live safely and undisturbed in the *polis*.

perspective, Socrates's similarities with Plato are decisive. From the perspective of the *polis*, Plato and Socrates are both wise men (*sophoi*) who are experts in eternal truth. Even though Socrates refused to impose philosophical truths on the citizens of Athens, Arendt notes that he nevertheless appeared as an expert in philosophical truth and was often met with ridicule and hostility because he represented a threat to "the specific political reality of the citizens."¹³⁴ From this perspective, "it was not Plato but Socrates who was the first philosopher to overstep the line drawn by the polis for the *sophos*, for the man who is concerned with eternal, nonhuman, and nonpolitical things."¹³⁵ From this perspective, Plato's political philosophy is understood not as a betrayal of Socrates but as a betrayal of the speechless pathos of wonder at the invisible, harmonious order of the universe that is the starting-point of both Plato and Socrates's philosophy.

While this perspective on the relationship between Plato and Socrates is undoubtedly present in Arendt's earlier writings on philosophy and politics, it is more influential in her later writings in which her understanding of our tradition of political philosophy comes close to Berlin's in identifying it with the philosophical or metaphysical monism of the Socratic School. It needs to be emphasized that the significance of these two perspectives on the origins of our tradition of political philosophy is not that they are contradictory, but that they give a different meaning to the beginning of Plato's political philosophy. The difference, in short, is that in Arendt's later writings (especially in *Thinking*) the Western tradition of political philosophy originates

¹³⁴ Arendt, *PP*, p. 90.

¹³⁵ Arendt, *Socrates*, p. 11. See also pp. 25-26: "Socrates, all his protests not to possess any special teachable truth notwithstanding, must somehow already have appeared as an expert in truth. The abyss between truth and opinion... was already indicated, or rather foreshadowed, in the figure of this one man who, wherever he went, tried to make everybody around him, and first of all himself, more truthful."

not in a radical separation of philosophy from politics as illustrated in her earlier and more conventional “from Socrates to Plato” interpretation of Plato’s *Republic*, but in a radical *application* of philosophy to politics born out of the philosopher’s fear for his own life. The result, Arendt argues, is a political philosophy that is deeply hostile toward politics and the realm of human affairs.

Political Philosophy’s Hostility Toward Politics

To illustrate the intensity of the hostility toward politics that is at the origin of our tradition of political philosophy, Arendt liked to quote what she called Pascal’s “rather weighty argument” about Plato and Aristotle:

We can only think of Plato and Aristotle in grand academic robes. They were honest men, like others, laughing with their friends, and when they diverted themselves with writing the *Laws* and the *Politics*, they did it as an amusement. That part of their life was the least philosophic and the least serious; the most philosophic was to live simply and quietly. If they wrote on politics, it was as if laying down rules for a lunatic asylum; and if they presented the appearance of speaking of a great matter, it was because they knew that the madmen, to whom they spoke, thought they were kings and emperors. They entered into their [the madmen’s] principles in order to make their madness as little harmful as possible.¹³⁶

“This may sound funny or surprising,” Arendt writes, “but a serious look into Plato and Aristotle shows how right Pascal was.”¹³⁷ I think we should interpret Arendt’s repeated use of Pascal’s irreverent portrayal of Plato and Aristotle as serving her argument that Plato was a philosopher who, after the death of Socrates, regarded the realm of politics to

¹³⁶ Arendt, *WIPP*, image 6, p. 024420, quoting Pascal, *Thoughts [Pensees]*, No. 331, trans. W. F. Trotter (Harvard Classics, 1910), p. 116. Arendt makes minor alterations to the Trotter translation, which is quoted verbatim here. Arendt copied this passage in the original French into her *Denktagebuch* in June of 1954 (*D2*, p. 485). She used this passage a few months later in her 1954 APSA lecture, *CP*, p. 429. It then appears in *Thinking*, pp. 152-3, and *LKPP*, pp. 21-22.

¹³⁷ Arendt, *WIPP*, image 6, p. 024420.

be the most serious threat to his life, and his political philosophy was designed to render that realm “as little harmful as possible” toward philosophy.

In Pascal’s thought the object of the harm (*mal*) in both the original French¹³⁸ and English translation is ambiguous. A reader sympathetic toward Plato and Aristotle, such as Leo Strauss (or Bernard Williams¹³⁹), could resolve the ambiguity by arguing that Plato and Aristotle conceive of their political philosophy as beneficial for the city or world, not just for themselves.¹⁴⁰ In contrast, Arendt approaches and interprets Pascal’s thought with almost no sympathy toward political philosophy. For Arendt, the harm that Plato and Aristotle fear is the harm posed to themselves by the *polis*. What Plato saw, according to Arendt, was that as a philosopher he could not be sure he would always be perceived by the many as a harmless “laughingstock.”¹⁴¹ By putting Socrates to death, the *polis* showed that it could not be trusted with preserving the philosopher’s earthly life.¹⁴² Fearing not just laughter and ridicule but death, Plato concluded that his life and activity could be secured only if political affairs were managed in such a way “that there may be philosophy, that philosophers will have *scholē* [leisure from labor and politics] and be undisturbed by those matters that arise from living together, which, in turn, have their

¹³⁸ *Ils entrent dans leurs principes, pour modérer leur folie au moins mal qu’il se peut.*

¹³⁹ Bernard Williams, *Plato: The Invention of Philosophy* (Great Britain: Phoenix, 1998), pp. 37-38.

¹⁴⁰ See Leo Strauss’s remarks about Pascal’s thought in his 1942 lecture, “What Can We Learn From Political Theory?,” *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007), p. 519.

¹⁴¹ Arendt, *Socrates*, p. 9 and *Heidegger*, p. 301.

¹⁴² The *polis*, because it was in decay, also could not be trusted to preserve Socrates’ memory or “earthly immortality” (Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 129). From the perspective of a concern for immortality, one might argue that Plato wrote in order to create material monuments in which the memory of Socrates would be preserved forever on earth. Arendt suggests, however, that earthly immortality was not the highest goal for philosophers because they could experience immortality in this life by philosophizing, that is, by dwelling in the neighborhood of, and assimilating themselves to, the divine harmonious order. See, e.g., *Republic* 6.500c.

ultimate origin in the imperfection of human life.”¹⁴³ Since the Athenians proved incapable of such a task, Plato famously argued in the *Republic* that it is up to the philosophers to rule, or for rulers to become philosophers, “not so much for the sake of the polis and politics...as for the sake of philosophy and the safety of the philosopher,” Arendt writes.¹⁴⁴ Our tradition of political philosophy thus has its origin in Plato’s philosophical view of politics as concerned with material matters related to human survival that need to be managed in a “halfway reasonable” way in order for a leisurely life devoted to philosophy to be possible.¹⁴⁵ “From then on,” Arendt explains, “the distinction between ruling and being ruled invaded the realm of politics directly; and the rule over the necessities of life became the precondition, not of politics, but of philosophy.”¹⁴⁶

Arendt finds in Pascal’s thought, in other words, a grossly exaggerated but effective account of the birth of our tradition of political philosophy not out of an admiring wonder at politics but out of Plato’s (and Aristotle’s) fearful contempt for politics as a matter of survival that deserves attention and thought only because all humans are embodied mortals who inescapably live in a web of interrelationships and mutual dependencies, and if those relationships and dependencies are not managed in a halfway reasonable manner, philosophy is not possible.¹⁴⁷ Arendt finds Pascal’s thought

¹⁴³ Arendt, *TET*, p. 84. See also *KMPT*, p. 315.

¹⁴⁴ Arendt, *Authority*, p. 107. See also pp. 109-110.

¹⁴⁵ Arendt, *TET*, pp. 81-84.

¹⁴⁶ Arendt, *KMPT*, p. 286.

¹⁴⁷ Since Arendt’s view of political philosophy seems to predate her notes on and use of Pascal, I would disagree with Ronald Beiner’s otherwise perceptive remark that “It is as if Pascal indelibly imprinted upon Arendt’s thinking an image of the philosophic tradition’s abiding relation to politics, and permanently shaped the (counter-)task of her own political philosophy.” Beiner, “Rereading ‘Truth and Politics,’” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34:1-2 (2008), p. 134n9.

so useful not because she literally agrees with him that Plato and Aristotle meant their political philosophy to be an amusing joke. Rather, she agrees with Pascal that their political philosophy is inspired by a historically specific fear and loathing of politics as a mad realm of the many which, for the sake of the realization of higher ends such as philosophical contemplation, needs to be ruled by philosophers who must rely on the only knowledge they possess—knowledge of the eternal ideas (*eidōs*).

Plato's political philosophy comes into being, then, according to Arendt, only in his later works in which the philosopher is called upon to use his knowledge of eternal truths to measure and judge human affairs. The philosopher must somehow apply his ideas to the city, because they cannot be argued out and demonstrated to the many who lack "the eyes for the invisible measures of all visible things."¹⁴⁸ Hence the affinity of the philosopher for ruling or tyranny "is inevitable if one believes in being able, through philosophy, to discover *the* truth for man as such."¹⁴⁹ Since the many do not know what is good for themselves or the city, their conduct must be ruled by those who do know, the philosophers. In the actions of men, the one, only and final court of appeal is to the standards of the philosopher-king. Unlike a tyrant who wishes to have a monopoly on public affairs, Plato's philosopher-kings would allow¹⁵⁰ citizens to "retain some part in

¹⁴⁸ Arendt, *RP*, p. 382.

¹⁴⁹ Letter to Gertrud and Karl Jaspers, December 25, 1950, *HAKJ*, p. 160, emphasis in original. On the affinity of philosophers for tyranny, see also *NT*, p. 360, and *Heidegger*, pp. 302-3. It is important to note, however, that Arendt distinguishes the rule of Plato's philosopher-king from tyranny as understood in the tradition. See *HC*, p. 224.

¹⁵⁰ In writing of what Plato "would allow" I am cognizant of Jeremy Waldron's caution against treating and evaluating Plato as though he were appointed to or running for public office. Arendt, and myself writing about Arendt, write about Plato as Waldron would have us do, as a political philosopher who offers a profoundly influential understanding of politics and what is involved in making judgments in that realm. See Waldron, "What Plato Would Allow," chapter 5 in *Theory and Practice* (NOMOS 37), eds. Ian Shapiro and Judith Wagner DeCew (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 138-78.

the handling of public affairs,” but only as parts of a monist whole in which “the many become one in every respect” (except bodily) through rule. Citizens thus “would indeed ‘act’ like one man without even the possibility of internal dissension, let alone factional strife.”¹⁵¹

What is more, since human affairs can never measure up to the philosopher-king’s desire to rule the city in accordance with an invisible pattern or oneness in the sky of ideas, the philosopher is bound to regard politics (understood as the art of ruling) as a reflection of or necessitated by human wickedness and imperfection, a necessary evil in order to take care of the elementary needs of human life, and a means to higher ends since it has no intrinsic dignity that makes it an activity worth pursuing for its own sake.¹⁵² Such views are not restricted to political philosophers, Arendt notes, but are also found in the thought of political writers who are burdened by the Western tradition of political philosophy, such as Thomas Paine¹⁵³ and James Madison.¹⁵⁴ It is well known that Arendt wanted no part of such a contemptuous attitude toward politics, which is why she would not call herself a philosopher and thought of herself as having left philosophy to become a political theorist.¹⁵⁵

Conclusion

¹⁵¹ Arendt, *HC*, p. 224.

¹⁵² See, e.g., Arendt, *Socrates*, p. 37. On the Greek concern to “measure up” to the eternal, see *HC*, p. 232 and *TPT*, p. 61.

¹⁵³ Arendt, *D2*, September 1953, pp. 437-38: “Thomas Paine: *Common Sense*: “Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices...Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil.” See also *HC*, p. 110n54.

¹⁵⁴ Arendt, *TET*, p. 85: “...the melancholy reflection of James Madison, that government surely is nothing but a reflection on human nature, which would not be necessary if men were angels.” See also *HC*, p. 110n54.

¹⁵⁵ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 322.

In this chapter, I have focused on the way in which both Arendt and Berlin understand the “monist” assumptions of the Western tradition and their implications for politics and political thought. Arendt agrees with Berlin that the hallmark of the monist tradition of political philosophy is the claim to know, often through a metaphysical eye, some pattern that holds the final solution to the problems of human living-together. Confronted with the political task of blending the variety of men and purposes into a way of life worthy of human beings, thinkers in the monist tradition conceive of politics as a science based on the perception of a (metaphysical) pattern that exists behind the variety of men and purposes, and which can be used like a blueprint for ordering men into a harmonious whole. Monism, in short, is the idea that we can conceive of an end or target—the good for man—at which humans as such should aim their life, that the road to this target is the path of all good things—happiness, virtue, freedom, justice, etc.—and those who have knowledge of the good are the experts or specialists who should be given supreme power to lead the human caravan into the future at whatever cost in human lives.

For Berlin, the Western tradition of political philosophy’s hostility toward politics is evident in its view that the variety of human purposes and values is not fundamental and permanent but can and should be arranged into one harmonious whole like a jigsaw puzzle, even if this requires doing great harm to individuals. The monist vision of the individual as a part in a systematic whole is an attack on the moral dignity of human beings who should be left with some freedom to shape their own values and characters and not be forced or otherwise made to fit into a preconceived pattern of life. Berlin finds the monist vision of society profoundly unpolitical, for it allows virtually no legitimate

place for political theory understood as a form of critical thinking about the ultimate values and ends of life.

For Arendt, our tradition of political philosophy is not a tradition of thinking about politics, aroused by political problems, in order to make political life possible, but a way of thinking that, historically, began in the philosophical experience of wonder arising from the sudden appearance of a divine everlasting oneness, and this wonder was transformed by Plato into knowledge of what is good for man to be applied to politics as the supreme measure and standard for judging and ruling human affairs. In other words, the transcendent quality of Plato's eternal "ideas" lent themselves to being used as rules, measures, and principles of action. Applied to politics, Plato's philosophy took on the task of setting politics in motion in accordance with an end or pattern outside of it and for the sake of a better kind of life than politics, namely the life of philosophy. In this way, according to Arendt, Plato deprived the political realm of its dignity. Most importantly, Arendt construes political philosophy as historically, if not inherently, hostile to the realm of politics over which it aims to rule in accordance with knowledge of the truth or good for man as such.

Whatever else Arendt and Berlin may have been doing in the 1930s and 1940s when they left philosophy to study politics and political theory (or the history of ideas), they were not distancing themselves from philosophy altogether, but mainly from the enmity toward politics—humans as acting beings, with a variety of purposes and values—characteristic of the great tradition. Moreover, neither of them, it seems, could have mounted an effective critique of the monist tradition of political philosophy without

the help of Machiavelli, whose thought inspired Berlin's value pluralism as well as Arendt's efforts to recover the dignity and glory of political action and power. It is to the significance of Machiavelli for their critique of the monist tradition, and for the development of their respective conceptions of pluralism as the condition of politics and foundation for a new political philosophy, that I now turn.

CHAPTER 2

In Meinecke's Shadow: Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin's Discovery of a "Pagan" Machiavelli in Christian Europe

The topic of this chapter is the manner in which Arendt and Berlin read the political thought of Machiavelli. Informed by, and in Arendt's case, reacting against, Friedrich Meinecke's post-World War One account of Machiavelli, both Arendt and Berlin read Machiavelli's work as mounting a challenge to Plato, Christianity, and the monist tradition of political philosophy. Both read Machiavelli's indictment of Christian values in politics as an equally powerful indictment of Plato and the Platonic tradition. As Arendt explains, "it is irrelevant whether the *civitas Dei* gives meaning and order to the *civitas terrena*, or whether the *bios theoretikos* prescribes its rules and is the ultimate end of the *bios politicos*,"¹ for in both cases politics is deprived of all dignity of its own and becomes a necessary evil—necessary for the possibility of living either the philosophical or Christian way of life, and evil because, being associated with labor and survival, it is intrinsically inferior to a life devoted to contemplating eternal truths or to the salvation of one's soul.² Simply put, both Arendt and Berlin find in Machiavelli a vision of a glorious public political space or state that is so fundamentally at odds with our traditional Platonic and Christian view of politics and government as something we submit to as a necessary evil so we can live together in a community and spend our time pursuing nonpolitical activities and interests, that it requires us to think about the reality of politics in a new way.

¹ Arendt, *KMPT*, p. 316. See also *SQMP*, p. 51.

² See Arendt, *KMPT*, p. 313, *TET*, p. 84, *HC*, p. 229.

Arendt sought out, welcomed, and elaborated upon Machiavelli's new way of thinking about politics as a challenge to the tradition. In the margin of her 1955 notes on Machiavelli, she jotted down a quick comparison with Plato: "The philosophers are afraid that worse men will rule, they are afraid for themselves, M. [Machiavelli] is afraid for the world, i.e., Italy."³ She never tired of repeating what she called Machiavelli's credo: "I love my native city more than my own soul."⁴ Machiavelli's political philosophy, especially his critique of Christianity, was inspirational for her own articulation of the importance of *amor mundi*, love of the world, of the very reality of politics.

In contrast, Berlin just happened to read Machiavelli at Oxford and found in his works a pagan form of monism featuring an Aristotelian form of morality (as a branch of politics) which, he argued, accounts for the vehement rejection and vilification of Machiavelli by his liberal and Christian readers. Berlin's personal encounter with Machiavelli's pagan monism, being so at odds with the Platonic and Christian tradition as well as with liberalism, led him to embrace Meinecke's view that Machiavelli had produced a diremption of the monist tradition, and to argue that there is enough truth in what Machiavelli says to raise the issue of a plurality of incompatible but equally ultimate ways of life.

This chapter consists of my reading of Arendt and Berlin's reading of Machiavelli. When reading their essays, notes, and letters that deal with Machiavelli, it is crucial to keep in mind that neither Arendt nor Berlin aimed to interpret Machiavelli with

³ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 4, p. 024017.

⁴ Arendt, *OR*, p. 286n20. Arendt refers to Machiavelli's credo as exemplifying *amor mundi* several times. See Arendt, *Dissent, Power, and Confrontation*, ed. Alexander Klein (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), p. 115, *LKPP*, p. 50 and *Toronto*, p. 311.

respect to his own cultural, linguistic, and political background. In “The Originality of Machiavelli,” which began as a lecture in the late 1950s, Berlin set out “to account both for the continuing horror [of Machiavelli’s political views] and for the differences among the commentators.”⁵ Berlin would deliver his lecture, as Robert Wokler vividly remembers, by

hurtling through the twenty-eight alternative readings of Machiavelli [...] as entranced students listened while the insecure stenographers among them hopelessly failed to get it all down. Isaiah himself, of course, had not brought along a text at all. He spoke from memory, without props, apart perhaps from a crumpled sheet of paper at the lectern or even in his pocket, which he seldom consulted. His voice alone was the overhead projector; from his mouth cascaded proper names and nouns and especially adjectives, layered one upon another like coats of varnish, each of a subtly nuanced, ever so slightly different, shade. I know of no academic figure who could intelligibly articulate more words in a shorter space of time.⁶

The point of this anecdote is to emphasize that Berlin’s famously shallow and breathless survey of the vast variety of interpretations of Machiavelli’s works is not driven by an interest in shedding light on the full context or depth of Machiavelli’s thought, but in understanding the secret of Machiavelli’s influence and reception over the last five-hundred years. Readers looking to Berlin for scrupulous and studied scholarly insights into Machiavelli’s works, subtle textual analysis, or even clear insights into politics, are missing the point of his personal and wide-ranging essay that aims to sharpen rather than dilute Machiavelli’s shocking originality. Just as Arendt did not want to dilute the shocking originality of totalitarianism by assimilating it to familiar evils or rooting it in the great tradition, so Berlin argues against the long history of commentary on

⁵ Berlin, *NM*, p. 27.

⁶ Robert Wokler, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 150:4 (December 2006), pp. 669-670.

Machiavelli that dilutes the bite of his “ideas” in a sea of context, footnotes, distinctions, and qualifications.

Arendt, by contrast, did not write a single essay devoted to Machiavelli’s political thought. Her thoughts on Machiavelli have to be painstakingly pieced-together by combing through several sets of unpublished lecture notes as well as her published books and essays that deal with different aspects of his thought. We get a good sense of Arendt’s fascination with Machiavelli in a letter she wrote to the secretary of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago with an exam question about Machiavelli for one of her students, Miss Beth Goldring. After quoting from chapter three of Machiavelli’s *Prince* in which Machiavelli recounts his conversation about war and politics with the Cardinal of Rouen while he was on a diplomatic mission in France, Arendt poses the following question to her student: “Write an essay on Machiavelli’s notion of stato, politics, keeping in mind Machiavelli’s critique of the Christian religion as well as the role of the Church in Italy.”⁷

Arendt’s lecture notes show that she spent the majority of her time teaching her students to interpret Machiavelli’s unique use of the term *lo stato* as equivalent to his understanding of “politics,” which is fundamentally opposed to the Church and its Christian religion. Arendt succinctly stated her main message about Machiavelli in *On Revolution* thus: “Machiavelli was the first to visualize the rise of a purely secular realm whose laws and principles of action were independent of the teachings of the Church in particular, and of moral standards, transcending the sphere of human affairs, in general. It

⁷ Letter to Miss Mary Ann Fordyce, July 18, 1972, image 41, p. 020051, underlining in original. Students—University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.—Correspondence—E-G—1963-1974. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

was for this reason that he insisted that people who entered politics should first learn ‘how not to be good’, that is, how not to act according to Christian precepts.”⁸ This is Arendt’s clearest statement of Machiavelli’s challenge to the Platonic tradition as well as to the moral teachings of the Church in Rome.

What Arendt wanted her students to appreciate about Machiavelli, as she stated at the outset of her 1965 course at Cornell, “From Machiavelli to Marx,” is that he was not a philosopher like Parmenides and Plato but an exemplary political “writer” who never raises the question of the purpose of politics or the end of government because, as a man of action, he took it for granted that “political life is the best life.”⁹ That is, “it cannot have an ‘end,’ a goal that would be higher than itself.”¹⁰ Furthermore, since Machiavelli was not a philosopher we cannot expect his thought to exhibit the consistency of a philosophical system. Instead we have to examine his way of “thinking” and “approaching things,” his “fundamental convictions.”¹¹ Accordingly, in my investigation of Arendt’s Machiavelli, I focus on her understanding of Machiavelli’s approach to *lo stato* and of his convictions, especially his Platonic- and Christian-tradition-defying convictions about the autonomy and dignity of politics.

It is also important to note upfront that while one might expect a chapter on Arendt’s sympathy for Machiavelli to serve a larger argument about Arendt’s Roman republican political thought, this is not my purpose. In general, I take Arendt’s own outlook to be a *sui generis* combination of her own practical political engagements as a

⁸ Arendt, *OR*, p. 36.

⁹ Arendt, *Cornell*, image 1, p. 023453.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Jew¹² and her studies of ancient Greek and Roman political thought,¹³ early Christian thought (especially Augustine¹⁴), the thought the American and French revolutionary tradition of which Machiavelli is the spiritual father, nineteenth-century Marxism (Marx and Engels) and liberalism (Tocqueville, Constant, Mill), Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and twentieth-century French (Camus, Sartre) and especially German (Jaspers, Heidegger, Husserl) phenomenology and existentialism,¹⁵ all wrapped up in a vaguely religious—specifically Christian—language that tends to conceal her emphatically secular stance

¹² For an overview of Arendt's political philosophy through the lens of her concern with Jewish issues, see Leon Botstein, "The Jew as Pariah: Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy," *Dialectical Anthropology* 8:1/2 (October 1983), pp. 47-73 and, more recently, Ron H. Feldman's Introduction to Arendt's *Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. xli-lxxvi. On Arendt's political engagements, especially with Jewish issues, see Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt's Political Engagements," in *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, eds. Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz and Thomas Keenan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 55-62 as well as the essays by Leon Botstein, Jerome Kohn, Ron H. Feldman, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl and Suzanne Vromen in Part V of the *Thinking in Dark Times* volume, "Judaism and Cosmopolitanism," pp. 161-220.

¹³ On Arendt's debt to Greek and Roman thought see Jacques Taminiaux, "Athens and Rome," chapter 8 in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 165-177 and Roy Tsao, "Arendt Against Athens: Rereading *The Human Condition*," *Political Theory* 30:1 (February 2002), pp. 97-123. For Arendt's republicanism see Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For a severely critical reading of Arendt's Roman politics, see A. Dirk Moses, "Das römische Gespräch in a New Key: Hannah Arendt, Genocide, and the Defense of Republican Civilization," *The Journal of Modern History* 85:4 (December 2013), pp. 867-913.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the Arendt's complex and evolving relationship to and use of Augustine's thought, see Roy Tsao, "Second Thoughts, New Beginnings: Notes on Arendt's Unmarked Itinerary from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *The Human Condition*," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 28:1 (2007), 7-27 and Tsao, "Arendt's Augustine," chapter 2 in *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 39-57. See also Charles T. Mathewes, "Evil as privation: Hannah Arendt's Augustinian ontology," chapter 4 in *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 149-200 and Sarah E. Spengeman's dissertation, "Saint Augustine and Hannah Arendt on Love of the World: An Investigation into Arendt's Reliance on and Refutation of Augustinian Philosophy" (Notre Dame, June 2014).

¹⁵ On Arendt's debt to Heidegger, see Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). On Arendt's existentialism, see George Kateb, "Existential Values in Arendt's Treatment of Evil and Morality," chapter 16 in *Politics in Dark Times*, pp. 342-374. On Arendt's combination of (German) existentialism and republicanism see Dana Villa, "Arendt and Heidegger, Again," chapter 9 in *Public Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 302-337.

toward the meaningfulness of politics.¹⁶ These are, in any case, the thinkers and subjects that Arendt studied and they all left deep, traceable marks on her thinking. In focusing on her debt to and use of Machiavelli in this chapter I do not mean to deny or downplay her debt to these other thinkers and schools of thought or to portray her outlook as exclusively “republican,” although the civic republican “tradition” is especially prominent and crucial to her work.

For his part, Berlin studied everything Arendt did except early Christian thought, the founding fathers of the American revolution, German philosophy, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Berlin spent more time than Arendt studying Marx’s writings, Russian Marxism, and nineteenth-century French and British liberalism. He also studied late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Oxford philosophy, modern “Enlightenment” philosophy broadly defined, several major nineteenth-century Russian critics and writers (Belinsky, Blok, Herzen, Tolstoy, Turgenev, etc.) and several major and minor romantic or “anti-Enlightenment” European thinkers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Vico, Hamann, Herder, etc.). I focus on “The Originality of Machiavelli” in this essay because it was his encounter with Machiavelli, as Berlin himself tells us,¹⁷ that shook his earlier faith in the *philosophia perennis* of the Western tradition, that harmonious “tune of the good, the true and the beautiful” which Berlin had defended as a precocious

¹⁶ For an overview of Arendt’s recourse to religious thinkers, experiences, and language, see James Bernauer, “A Catholic Conversation with Hannah Arendt,” in *Friends on the Way: Jesuits Encounter Contemporary Judaism*, ed. Thomas Michel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), pp. 42-165.

¹⁷ Berlin, *POI*, pp. 6-7.

student at Oxford in the early 1930s as the basis of Western civilization, and which he feared was coming under attack again by the Communists in Russia.¹⁸

Friedrich Meinecke and the Postwar Image of Machiavelli

The most relevant background and context for understanding both Arendt and Berlin's readings of Machiavelli is perhaps the German historian Friedrich Meinecke's tremendously influential book, *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (1924), translated in 1957 as *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d'Etat and Its Place in Modern History*.¹⁹ As Jérémie Barthas explains in his study of Machiavelli's reception in modernity, Meinecke took Machiavelli's legendary "immoral" approach to the state and connected it to the First and, later, Second World Wars. He did so by arguing that "by lifting the veil of secrecy and mystery that had long shrouded the rules of Machiavellism and reason of state, Machiavelli had spread a poison, and in liberating this

¹⁸ Berlin's earlier faith is clearly expressed in his editorial in *The Oxford Outlook* (June 1931), which features his translation of Alexander Blok's "The Collapse of Humanism" (1919). His editorial concludes as follows: "What we wish to maintain is firstly that this feeling of revolt against the tyranny of Western Europe, this hatred of all its ways of thought and action, is now at work in Russia and inspires those artists, whether writers or makers of films, who have long ago seen through the political or social ideals of communist theory, and now use them as a screen rather than as an instrument for their attack on civilization; secondly that this is what makes their work a very effective weapon against that intellectual and moral organization, that 'tune of the good, the true and the beautiful' on which our lives are based; and finally that more serious attention must be paid to it than has hitherto been paid, because if we *are* going to defend our Western forms of life, we might as well be clear as to what precisely it is that we are going to defend them against, and what we are to expect if we should lose (as Blok affirms that we have already lost) the fight for the civilization which we call our own and which determines all our present values" (Berlin, *Blok*, pp. 75-76, emphasis in original).

¹⁹ Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison D'état and its Place in Modern History*, trans. Douglas Scott (New York: Praeger, 1965 [1957]). Before the English translation was published Arendt had read the German version and Berlin may have done so as well. Meinecke was a founder of the field of the history of political ideas in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century. On Meinecke's practice of intellectual history in his German context, see Benedikt Stuchtey, "German Historical Writing," chapter 8 in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 4: 1800-1945*, esp. pp. 179-182. See also Ernst Schulz, "German 'Geistesgeschichte', American 'Intellectual History' and French 'Histoire des Mentalités' since 1900. A Comparison," *History of European Ideas* 1:3 (1981), pp. 195-214. For a useful and much needed reconsideration of the continuity across Meinecke's works, see Troy R. E. Paddock, "Rethinking Friedrich Meinecke's Historicism," *Rethinking History* 10:1 (March 2006), pp. 95-108.

esoteric knowledge...he made possible a mass Machiavellism, whose potential the German Third Reich turned into reality in the most horrible way.”²⁰

As both Arendt and Berlin knew, Meinecke was the first to make the case for regarding Machiavelli’s political thought as an epoch-making turning point in the history of Western political thought. In Meinecke’s famous metaphor, which Berlin echoes in his own essay, Machiavelli’s “ancient heathen idealism of the State”

was a sword which was plunged into the flank of the body politic of Western humanity, causing it to shriek and rear up. This was bound to happen; for not only had genuine moral feeling been seriously wounded, but death had also been threatened to the Christian views of all churches and sects, and therefore to the strongest bond uniting men and nations, the highest spiritual power that reigned over them.²¹

Threatening death to Christianity, Machiavelli’s ancient idealism of the State, in Meinecke’s view, liberated political action and the State’s powers from the constraints of universal moral and religious bonds. Putting forth an epoch-making vision of a modern State animated by men of heathen *virtù*, Machiavelli approached the State as a kind of “supra-individual and independent state personality, which would stand over against the actual rulers of the time,”²² and which “could be permitted to trespass and encroach on the moral world in order to achieve its aims”—namely, growth and the development and creation of *virtù*.²³ In Machiavelli’s vision, according to Meinecke, Christian religion and morality “became nothing more than means towards the goal of a State animated by

²⁰ Jérémie Barthas, “Machiavelli from the age of revolutions to the present,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 262. See also in the same volume Victoria Kahn, “Machiavelli’s reputation to the eighteenth century,” pp. 252-53.

²¹ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, pp. 45, 49.

²² Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 26.

²³ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 33.

virtù.”²⁴ Although Machiavelli’s vision of a new worldly system of moral and political ideals that would rival Christianity turned out to be a dream that was “altogether beyond the capabilities and the wishes of the people and the rulers of that time,” Meinecke argues that later generations with “newly-animated” Christian consciences rose up in opposition to Machiavelli’s idealism of the State, thereby creating and propagating the enduring image of Machiavelli as the father of Machiavellism or Machiavellianism.²⁵

Meinecke’s portrait of Machiavelli cast a long shadow over twentieth century scholarship on Machiavelli. *Machiavellism* forms an important and hitherto unappreciated part of the intellectual setting of both Arendt and Berlin’s writings on Machiavelli.²⁶ Although Arendt and Berlin did not emphasize their engagement with Meinecke’s Machiavelli, careful readers cannot fail to be struck by it.

Arendt was a sympathetic yet critical reader of Meinecke. Arendt owned a copy of Meinecke’s *Die Idee der Staatsräson*, which contains her marginalia and underlining. In Arendt’s 1961 syllabus for her seminar on Machiavelli at Wesleyan, the list of required readings begins with the introduction and first chapter of *Machiavellism*.²⁷ As a professor at the University of Chicago in the 1970s, Arendt assigned *Machiavellism* to her students on the Committee on Social Thought.²⁸ She was also a reader of Meinecke’s

²⁴ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 35.

²⁵ Meinecke, *Machiavellism*, p. 45. Felix Gilbert, who studied under Meinecke, wrote a short history of Machiavellism. See Gilbert, “Machiavellism,” chapter 7 in his *History: Choice and Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 155-76.

²⁶ Meinecke’s name does not appear in Young-Bruehl’s biography of Arendt or in Ignatieff’s authorized biography of Berlin.

²⁷ Arendt, *Wesleyan*, image 1, p. 024233.

²⁸ Letter to Maurice Farge, March 17, 1967, Students—University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.—Correspondence—E-G—1963-1974 (Series: Subject File, 1949-1975, n.d.), image 3, p. 020022. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

works on history and historicism, quoting from them in her essays “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought” and “The Concept of History.”²⁹

Although her extensive lecture notes on Machiavelli for her history of political theory course given at Berkeley in the Fall of 1955 do not mention Meinecke, her paper prepared for the CCF conference in Milan that September explicitly engages with his account of Machiavelli. While acknowledging that his book made it customary to see Machiavelli as the father of *raison d'état*, Arendt argues that what is even more striking is that “Machiavelli and Robespierre very frequently speak the same language... about the necessity of violence for the foundation of new and the reformation of corrupt political bodies.”³⁰ In her lecture notes for her “From Machiavelli to Marx” course given in the Fall of 1965 at Cornell, Arendt rejects Meinecke’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s conception of the state as an organic entity with its own law of motion or growth which pushes it to expand until it comes into conflict with other states. “This organic metaphor and growth,” she writes in her notes, “[are] utterly absent in Machiavelli for whom [the] state is stable.”³¹

In contrast to Arendt’s critical reading of Meinecke’s Machiavelli, Berlin was largely an uncritical admirer of his work and outlook. Indeed, it tends to be the case, as Zeev Sternhell writes, that “Berlin did not merely give an account of Meinecke’s thought; he adopted it.”³² Meinecke’s account of Machiavelli is the most important source (along

²⁹ Arendt, *CP*, p. 434, and *History*, p. 68.

³⁰ Arendt, *Milan*, p. 205. For a discussion (in French) of Arendt’s claim of a striking similarity between Machiavelli and Robespierre with respect to justifications for violence, see Gérard Sfez, “Les Langues de la Terreur,” in *La République et La Terreur* (Paris: Kimé, 1995), pp. 129-59.

³¹ Arendt, *Cornell*, image 6, p. 023458.

³² Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 379. Sternhell goes so far in assimilating Berlin to Meinecke that Berlin becomes an anti-

with F. Chabod, A. P. d'Entrèves, Landi and Prezzonlini) of Berlin's own understanding of Machiavelli as a champion of ancient Roman "pagan" values. "The sword of which Meinecke spoke," Berlin wrote in his essay on Machiavelli, "has not lost its edge: the wound has not healed."³³ Berlin was greatly influenced by Meinecke's *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (1936), translated in 1972 as *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, for which he wrote the Foreword. In the Foreword, Berlin emphasizes, among other things, a central theme of Meinecke's work that he made his own: the vast revolt of various thinkers, chief among them Machiavelli, against "the central classical and Christian concept of a world governed by a single, static natural law, in any one of its many forms."³⁴

Both Arendt and Berlin agree with Meinecke's judgment that Machiavelli is the father of modern *raison d'état*, even though they both believe that this is not what is most

democratic, anti-rationalist, relativist, post-modern liberal serving the enemies of liberalism. For a critical overview of Sternhell's argument, see Michele Battini and Nadia Urbinati, "Divorce Within Modernity," *European Journal of Sociology* 48:3 (December 2007), pp. 458-63. Throughout his life Berlin fought off charges that he was against democracy, equality, reason, and universalism. In seeking to understand the anti-enlightenment tradition and other enemies of Western civilization, Berlin's aim was always to make clear, as he said in 1931, "what precisely it is that we are going to defend them [our Western forms of life] against, and what we are to expect if we should lose...the fight for the civilization which we call our own and which determines all our present values" (*Blok*, p. 76). As Ignatieff rightly emphasized, "Berlin was the only liberal thinker of real consequence to take the trouble to enter the mental worlds of liberalism's sworn enemies. . . . [but this] made it impossible for him ever to fully return to the calm and classical light of the Enlightenment. He believed in reason, but not overmuch; he believed in moral universals, but he knew they had scant purchase on fanatics" (Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), pp. 249-50).

³³ Berlin, *NM*, p. 79. See also pp. 30, 32, 48-49, 54n1, 68. Meinecke's image reappears in Berlin's account of Herder's significance: "[B]y enabling this doctrine [romanticism] to emerge Herder did plunge a most terrible dagger into the body of European rationalism, from which it never recovered" (*RR*, p. 67).

³⁴ Berlin, *MH*, p. 206. As Yehoshua Arieli points out regarding Meinecke's book on historicism, "There is little doubt that he [Berlin] shares Meinecke's opinion regarding the seminal and liberating effects of Historism, of the romantic worldview and of the rise of the *Geisteswissenschaften*—and for precisely the same reason, namely, that it undermined the belief 'in the general validity of reason and its claims'." Yehoshua Arieli, "Sir Isaiah Berlin: Humanism and The Romantic Experience," in *On the Thought of Isaiah Berlin: Papers Presented in Honour of Professor Sir Isaiah Berlin on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1990), p. 15.

striking or original about him. Neither endorses Meinecke's claim that Machiavellian *raison d'état* has historically justified the idea of the State as a great organic whole that is entitled to flout common human morality and conquer all obstacles to ensure its growth and power. Arendt, as we have seen, rejected this claim as an inaccurate reading of Machiavelli's view of *lo stato*. And Berlin cannot fully endorse this claim either because it sails too close to what he called "the Charybdis of relativism that destroy[s] morality or reduce[s] its goals to matters, in the end, of subjective temperament or inclination."³⁵

Nonetheless, both Arendt and Berlin follow Meinecke's lead in interpreting Machiavelli as according primacy to politics—"real" and "Roman" (Arendt) or "Pagan" (Berlin)—as against the Platonic and Christian traditions, in which political action and the entire realm of human affairs is subject to the mastership of an absolute transcendent truth or Christian moral creed. Like Meinecke, both think of the originality of Machiavelli's political theory not in terms of some cold, tough-minded "realism," but as a new political idealism in which the State, the realm of politics, is not seen as originating in the imperfections, necessities, and wickedness of human life, as the Platonic tradition would have it, but in human (or heathen) *virtù*. In this sense, both Arendt and Berlin are students of Meinecke.

Arendt's Machiavelli: The Spiritual Father of Revolution

Arendt tells us why she read Machiavelli's works. In order to begin to understand "the reemergence of real politics" in the eighteenth-century American and French revolutions, Arendt felt the need to read the books that the men of the revolutions themselves felt the

³⁵ Berlin, *MH*, p. 211. This is a common criticism of Meinecke (and Berlin for that matter). See Gerald Strauss, "Meinecke, Historicism, and the Cult of the Irrational," *The German Quarterly* 26:2 (March 1953), pp. 107-11.

need to read.³⁶ In France, these men were Maximilien de Robespierre and Louis Antoine de Saint-Just; in America they were John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Ransacking “the archives of antiquity”³⁷ to find a model for the public realm that they wished to found, as well as the model citizen to inhabit it, they discovered in ancient Greece the citizen of the Athenian *polis*, and in ancient Rome the model of the *res publica* and the legends of its founding by Romulus or Aeneas. Although Arendt already had a strong appreciation for the political genius of the ancient Greeks, she realized that in order to understand the minds of the men of the revolutions, “the influence of the Romans was stronger” than that of the Greeks.³⁸

Moreover, as Arendt observes, before these men returned to the archives of antiquity in the late eighteenth-century, Machiavelli had already done so for revolutionary political purposes in the early sixteenth-century in his *Prince* (1513) and *Discourses* (c. 1513-17). Machiavelli, Arendt argues, is really “the spiritual father of revolution.”³⁹ Machiavelli is important for Arendt as the founder of “this other tradition”⁴⁰—which we should read with scare quotes around “tradition” because Arendt explicitly denies that she is uncovering or creating anything that can be called a tradition, with its intellectual function of prescribing how to think about political experiences or what truths to hold about the history of political thought.⁴¹ Arendt thus read Machiavelli in an effort to highlight his contributions to modern revolutionary theory.

³⁶ Arendt, *Toronto*, p. 330.

³⁷ Arendt, *Toronto*, p. 331.

³⁸ Arendt, *Toronto*, p. 331. See also *Willing*, p. 211.

³⁹ Arendt, *OR*, p. 37. See also *Milan*, p. 206 and *Authority*, p. 139.

⁴⁰ Arendt, *Toronto*, p. 330.

⁴¹ See Arendt, *GBPF*, pp. 14-15.

To this end, Arendt pays special attention to the ways in which Machiavelli, in recovering and conceptualizing the revolutionary act of rising and founding a new body politic, does or does not break from the framework of Plato and Greek philosophy. Generally speaking, Arendt found in Machiavelli the first thinker to recognize that history provides a richer storehouse of political examples and experiences to draw on than those that have been preserved, defined, and fitted into our tradition. In order to bring these examples and experiences lost to the tradition to light, Arendt writes, Machiavelli “could not simply revive or resort to an articulate conceptual tradition, but had himself to articulate those experiences which the Romans had not conceptualized but rather expressed in terms of Greek philosophy vulgarized for this purpose.”⁴² Implied in Machiavelli’s return to the ancient Romans, Arendt writes, is the “refusal of Greek philosophy and Christianity which had absorbed it” because neither afforded “primacy to politics.”⁴³

Machiavelli, however, does afford primacy to politics in Arendt’s view, and Arendt brings this out by focusing on Machiavelli’s differences with Plato. Among the earliest entries in Arendt’s *Denktagebuch* from 1950 to 1952, we find three entries in German in which Machiavelli stands symbolically in opposition to Plato and the Greek tradition because he approaches politics in terms of the nature of power and not in terms of the nature of man.⁴⁴ As against Greek philosophy and its uptake by Christianity, with their focus on the good of the self and of man in the singular, Machiavelli, according to Arendt, shows almost no interest in human nature; his focus is on evaluating human

⁴² Arendt, *Authority*, p. 138.

⁴³ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 15, p. 024029.

⁴⁴ See Arendt, *DI*, September 1950, p. 21, August 1952, p. 236 and December 1952, p. 280.

actions, not human nature.⁴⁵ Arendt dismisses Machiavelli's pessimistic characterization of human nature in *The Prince* as merely lip-service or homage paid to Christianity, a tradition whose existence he takes for granted, for his real interest is in problems of political power.⁴⁶ If Machiavelli offers any original insight into human nature, Arendt argues, it is the un-Christian observation "that people are at least as often *tempted* to do good and need an *effort* to do evil as vice versa."⁴⁷ The main point for Arendt is that unlike Plato, who is concerned with what is good for philosophy and the life of philosophers, and unlike Christianity with its concern for the good of human souls, Machiavelli teaches us that "the moment I act politically I'm not concerned with me, but with the world."⁴⁸

In other words, Arendt portrays Machiavelli as political theorist who seeks to understand ancient Roman political experiences with eyes unclouded by Greek and Christian philosophy (which we might call philosophies of man). It is thus not surprising to find in the critical literature the claim that Arendt found Machiavelli to be either, in Myriam Revault d'Allonnes's phrase, a "war-machine" (*machine de guerre*) against the Greek tradition of political philosophy, or an "exception," in Faisal Baluch's words, to her indictment of it, or, as Steve Buckler argues, an "anti-traditional" theorist of politics

⁴⁵ For a good discussion of Machiavelli's anthropology or moral psychology that debunks the idea (forwarded by Meinecke, among others) that he held a pessimistic view of human nature, see Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 190-197.

⁴⁶ Arendt, *DI*, August 1952, p. 236. On Machiavelli's acceptance of the factual reality of the tradition of Christian thought, with its teachings about eternal salvation and damnation and a transcendent, omnipotent God who knows human nature because He created it, see Arendt, *OR*, pp. 101-104.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *SQMP*, p. 80.

⁴⁸ Arendt, *Toronto*, p. 311.

who prefers to learn from examples.⁴⁹ Machiavelli thus anticipates, as it were, Arendt's own project of daring to attempt "to look upon the past with eyes undistracted by any tradition, with a directness which has disappeared from Occidental reading and hearing ever since Roman civilization submitted to the authority of Greek thought."⁵⁰

As we shall see, with the authority of Greek thought on her mind, Arendt argues that Machiavelli's justification of the use of violence to found a new political realm or to reform a corrupt one is still the expression of Greek philosophy. However, Machiavelli's notion of the political realm itself (*lo stato*), according to Arendt, suggests the anti-Platonic idea of politics as a realm of free action that is not subject to transcendent philosophical or religious standards. Indeed, as Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, Machiavelli is "the only postclassical political theorist" who made the "extraordinary effort to restore its old dignity to politics."⁵¹

Rising and Founding

Arendt finds in Machiavelli's return to Roman political experiences the "first sign" of the exhaustion of the tradition's usefulness for guiding political action.⁵² The main sign of this exhaustion is Machiavelli's dismissal of Plato and Aristotle's theory of political change in which governments necessarily and continually cycle through a defined sequence of forms. In contrast to this tradition, Machiavelli instead theorizes "the

⁴⁹ Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, "Peut-on Parler philosophiquement politique? Merleau-Ponty et Hannah Arendt lectures de Machiavel," in *L'enjeu Machiavel*, eds. Gerald Sfez and Michel Senellart (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001), p. 181; Faisal Baluch, "Arendt's Machiavellian Moment," *European Journal of Political Theory* 13:2 (April 2014), p. 155; Steve Buckler, "Political Theory and Political Ethics," chapter 7 in *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 139.

⁵⁰ Arendt, *TMA*, pp. 28-29.

⁵¹ Arendt, *HC*, p. 35.

⁵² Arendt, *Socrates*, p. 38.

possibility of founding a permanent, lasting, enduring body politic.”⁵³ To think about this possibility, Machiavelli rediscovers the ancient Roman goal of founding for eternity and makes the concept of founding “central, if not paramount” to his thought.⁵⁴

Machiavelli was convinced that the Italian city-states, as Arendt writes, were “foredoomed...by the advent of the nation-state,” whether ruled by a republic or a prince, and he realized that “politically the unbelievable turmoil of the city-states in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was an end and not a beginning; it was the end of the medieval townships with their self-government and their freedom of political life.”⁵⁵ If Italy was to have a future, Machiavelli believed, it would need to be united under the rule of a single republic or prince—it would have to become a nation-state to survive in a world of armed nation-states. Arendt speculates that Machiavelli’s ideal “would have been the enlargement of Florence until it had conquered all of Italy,” but given the power of France and Spain, he came to the conclusion that a new organization was needed to unify Italy and withstand these powerful territorial nation-states.⁵⁶

The Prince, on Arendt’s reading, invites a powerful man to liberate Italy from the barbarians, and in order to do so “this man will be a Founder of something new and therefore concept of foundation.”⁵⁷ Machiavelli’s *Prince*, on Arendt’s reading, teaches the “new men” of the condottieri to found a new principality, a new public sphere, a world of action where “shining and greatness is possible.”⁵⁸ Rising from privacy “like the

⁵³ Arendt, *OR*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ Arendt, *Authority*, p. 136.

⁵⁵ Arendt, *OR*, pp. 196-97, 38.

⁵⁶ Arendt, *Wesleyan*, image 22, p. 024254.

⁵⁷ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 1, p. 024014.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *OR*, p. 202 and *Machiavelli*, image 6, p. 024019.

sun rises,” the condottieri’s new career in politics consists of the laying of new foundations.⁵⁹ Arendt remarks that the metaphor of rising in *The Prince* “is used as in Plato and Parmenides, but now you rise from the Private into the Public, while in Plato and Parmenides you rose from the Public into the realm of truth.”⁶⁰ To rise into the political realm is like a “second birth,” as Arendt put it in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere, or a “second life.”⁶¹ In her notes on Machiavelli, Arendt says that rising is “actually the same as birth.”⁶² Not only is this the case at the level of Machiavelli’s language in *The Prince*, where some form of the verb *nascere*, “to be born,” is used at least twenty-seven times, as Wayne Rebhorn has noted.⁶³ At the level of the world and of politics, Arendt writes, “You insofar as you exist for the world come into being only after rising into that part of it where you can be seen and remembered.”⁶⁴ Here we see a good example of Arendt’s appreciation of the high status of politics in Machiavelli’s work. It is the realm into which, not out of which, one rises, and which is placed above all other realms except the divine, as opposed to the low status it is given in Plato’s philosophy. To rise and then to found, Arendt repeatedly remarks in her notes, are two stages of one and the same enterprise, and Machiavelli’s *Prince* teaches how to rise and how to found.

Machiavelli’s *Discourses*, too, call for the founding of a new body politic to withstand the “powerful barbarians and whoever else might attack it” that have and

⁵⁹ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 16, p. 024030, *Cornell*, image 3, p. 023455 and image 4, p. 023456.

⁶⁰ Arendt, *Chicago*, image 19, p. 023816.

⁶¹ See Arendt, *HC*, p. 176 and p. 24 (quoting Jaeger), *Chicago*, image 36, p. 023833, *Authority*, p. 117, Arendt, “Public Rights and Private Interests: In Response to Charles Frankel,” in *Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy*, eds. Michael Mooney and Florian Stuber (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 103.

⁶² Arendt, *Cornell*, image 4, p. 023456.

⁶³ Wayne Rebhorn, “Machiavelli’s *Prince* in the epic tradition,” chapter 5 in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John N. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 81-2.

⁶⁴ Arendt, *Cornell*, image 4, p. 023456.

continue to keep Italy divided “under many princes and lords, unable to unite under a single ruler.”⁶⁵ Although Machiavelli mentions the Trojan prince Aeneas three times in the *Discourses*, when he thinks about the task of founders in that book, Arendt observes, he thinks overwhelmingly in terms of the example of Romulus. For Machiavelli, as Arendt reads him, the task of foundation seems to require “the repetition, as it were, of the old legendary crime (Romulus slew Remus, Cain slew Abel) at the beginning of all history.”⁶⁶

For Arendt, Machiavelli’s advice regarding the necessity of employing violence to found is summed up in *Discourses* II.13, where he writes that “it seldom happens that men rise from low condition to high rank without employing either force or fraud,” and he concludes the chapter by saying that the employment of such means “is the less censurable the more it is concealed.”⁶⁷ In Arendt’s view, Machiavelli thus teaches new princes that violent and fraudulent means may be used to found a new body politic “because once you have founded, the means will disappear.”⁶⁸ The employment of force and fraud is necessary but temporary, and can be “concealed” from the political body that is supposed to be established through its use. Indeed, Arendt interprets the force and

⁶⁵ Machiavelli, “Selections from *The Discourses*,” in *The Essential Writings of Machiavelli*, ed. and trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Modern Library, 2007), I.12, pp. 153-54. Arendt follows George H. Sabine, J. H. Whitfield and other commentators in emphasizing those passages in Machiavelli’s works that speak of the Church in Rome as bearing responsibility for Italy’s disunity and misfortunes. See, e.g., Whitfield, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947), pp. 20-21 and Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York: H. Holt, 1937), pp. 336-338.

⁶⁶ Arendt, *OR*, p. 38. See also *Cornell*, image 5, p. 023457.

⁶⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses*, trans. Luigi Ricci, rev. E. R. P. Vincent (New York: Modern Library, 1950), II.13, pp. 318, 320. See also Arendt, *UP*, p. 321.

⁶⁸ Arendt, *Chicago*, image 19, p. 023816.

fraud employed in rising and founding as “prepolitical”⁶⁹—the same status she gives to the characteristically violent and invisible life lived outside the ancient Greek *polis*.⁷⁰

Machiavelli, according to Arendt, thus sees the task of founding not in the image of action but of fabrication, with its elements of violence and destruction: “You cannot make a table without killing trees, you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs, you cannot make a republic without killing people. In this respect, which was to become so fateful for the history of revolutions, Machiavelli and Robespierre were not Romans, and the authority to which they could have appealed would have been rather Plato.”⁷¹ By this Arendt means that because Machiavelli and Robespierre regarded founding not as the Romans did, as something that had happened without violence and with the sanction of religion, but as a supreme “end” to be made in the present, then Plato is right that the “the tyrant is indeed in the best position to achieve the purpose.”⁷² As Arendt sums up her account of Machiavelli as the spiritual father of revolution in “What Is Authority?,” she says that while he recovered and theorized the founding experience, he fitted it back into the Platonic tradition by reinterpreting it “in terms of the justification of (violent) means for a supreme end.”⁷³ Even though Arendt notes that Machiavelli’s view of the act of founding was indebted to Cicero⁷⁴—a man whose original experiences were, like Machiavelli’s, entirely political and who is really the first “exception”⁷⁵ to the Platonic

⁶⁹ Arendt, *Cornell*, image 3, p. 023455.

⁷⁰ Arendt, *HC*, p. 27.

⁷¹ Arendt, *Authority*, p. 139.

⁷² Arendt, *Authority*, p. 112.

⁷³ Arendt, *Authority*, p. 139.

⁷⁴ See Arendt, *Milan*, p. 204. Arendt is most certainly quoting this passage from Zera S. Fink, *The Classical Republicans*, 2nd edition (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1962 [1945]), p. 15, which appears in the bibliography of *On Revolution*.

⁷⁵ Arendt, *TET*, p. 86. See also *TPT*, p. 53.

tradition—Cicero, like Plato, “appeals explicitly to Scipio to become *dictator rei publicae constituendae*, to seize the dictatorship in order to restore the republic.”⁷⁶ Arendt points out that in his “Discourse on Reforming the Government of Florence,” Machiavelli “nearly textually repeated” Cicero’s view of founders as great, almost divine, men when he wrote that “no man is so much raised on high by any of his acts as are those who have reformed republics and kingdoms with new laws and institutions. . . . After those who have been gods, such men get the first praises.”⁷⁷ Machiavelli’s advice that a would-be founder needs to employ violence and well-used cruelty in order to succeed is “due not so much to his so-called realistic insight into human nature as to his futile hope that he could find some quality in certain men to match the qualities we associate with the divine.”⁷⁸

Machiavelli’s *Stato*, or Arendt’s Theorization of Politics

The new political body to be founded—fabricated—by almost any means necessary is what Machiavelli calls *lo stato*, which is similar to, but importantly different from, what we would call a nation-state.⁷⁹ Although Machiavelli may see the actions undertaken for

⁷⁶ Arendt, *Authority*, p. 139. See also *OR*, p. 207.

⁷⁷ Arendt, *OR*, p. 202. The passage in Cicero that Arendt refers to is found in *De re publica* [*On the Commonwealth*], Book I, paragraph 12, and she quotes it thus: “there exists nothing in which human virtue accedes closer to the holy ways [*numen*] of the gods than the foundation of a new or the preservation of an already established *civitas*” (*TPT*, p. 49). Arendt refers to this passage in several other works and notes. See, e.g., Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 9, p. 024022, *Cornell*, image 3, p. 023455 and image 4, p. 023456, *WIPP*, image 36, p. 024448, *Authority*, p. 121, *Willing*, p. 209, *Fathers*, paragraph IV. Given Machiavelli’s debt to Cicero, Arendt finds it “curious to see how seldom Cicero’s name occurs in Machiavelli’s writings and how carefully he avoided him in his interpretations of Roman history” (Arendt, *WF*, p. 294n59). Machiavelli harkens back to Cicero also in his language of regime change, using “Cicero’s *mutatio rerum*, his *mutazioni del stato*, in his descriptions of forcible overthrow of rulers and the substitution of one form of government for another, in which he is so passionately and, as it were, prematurely interested” (Arendt, *OR*, p. 36).

⁷⁸ Arendt, *OR*, p. 39, my emphasis.

⁷⁹ On the meaning of *lo stato* before Machiavelli, see Nicolai Rubinstein, “Notes on the word *stato* in Florence before Machiavelli,” in *Florilegium Historiale: Essays presented to Wallace K. Ferguson*, edited by J.G. Rowe and W.H. Stockdale (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 313-326. On the meaning of the term in Machiavelli’s *Prince*, see J. H. Hexter, “Il Principe and *lo stato*,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 4 (1957), pp. 113-138. For a useful recent discussion of Machiavelli’s conception of *lo stato*,

the sake of founding a new body politic as means to that supreme end, he does not see the political realm itself as a means to some higher end, nor does he theorize political action within *lo stato* in the image of fabrication, and this is what makes him an important political writer for Arendt.

Before proceeding, it is crucial to recall Arendt's purposes in reading and interpreting Machiavelli. Arendt was not an historian of Italy; her approach to Machiavelli's thought is not always historical and contextual, and she does not permit herself to be guided by the traditional interpretations of Machiavelli. On the contrary, she is critical of them. Her approach to Machiavelli is a good example of what she said she aimed to do after totalitarianism: think without a banister. Even though it is not inaccurate to say, as Arendt does, that Machiavelli's use of the term *stato* connotes politics or the general conditions of public life, Arendt is clearly imposing her own convictions on Machiavelli with her complex interpretation of this term in Machiavelli's writings.

Arendt identifies three meanings of *lo stato* in Machiavelli: (1) the secular against the religious (e.g. the Church), (2) the country against the government and (3) the public against the private, especially with respect to morality.⁸⁰ First, even though Machiavelli raises the possibility in both the *Prince* (ch. 11) and *Discourses* (I.12) of the unification of Italy by the temporal power of the Church in Rome, Arendt insists that *lo stato* is

see Jeremy Larkins, "Machiavelli, Territoriality, and *Lo Stato*," chapter 7 in *From Hierarchy to Anarchy: Territory and Politics before Westphalia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 123-144. For a discussion of Machiavelli within the larger genealogy of the modern state, see Quentin Skinner, "From the state of princes to the person of the state," chapter 14 in *Visions of Politics, Vol. 2: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 368-413, and most recently "What Should You Learn From Machiavelli?" *The New York Review of Books* (June 5, 2014).

⁸⁰ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 21, p. 024035.

entirely secular, i.e., opposed to the Church and Christianity.⁸¹ To illustrate the central role of the opposition between *stato* and the Church in Machiavelli's theoretical framework, Arendt cites his conversation with the Cardinal of Rouen at Nantes as recounted in the third chapter of *The Prince*. There Machiavelli writes, "When the cardinal declared that the Italians did not understand warfare, I replied that the French did not understand the state [*stato*]; because had they understood the state, they would not have let the Church rise to such power."⁸² On the basis of this incident at Nantes, as well as several passages in Machiavelli's *Discourses* critical of the Church's worldly power and moral teachings (e.g. I.12, II.2, and III.1), Arendt formed her decisive judgment about Machiavelli's understanding of politics: The realm of politics is what Machiavelli called *lo stato*, and the great idea put forward in *The Prince* is for a courageous person to start a new career for himself by founding a new, secular public realm. As Arendt theorizes it, *lo stato*, founded outside and against the Church, is where great deeds and words can appear, be seen, be remembered by posterity and be imitated—none of which, arguably, are Machiavelli's meanings or distinctions.

Second, Arendt insists that a *stato* refers to something like a country or nation-state and is not itself a form of government or rule; nor is it equivalent to *politeia* or *res publica*. But it always involves a kind of rule or government and it is similar to the Greek polis or Roman republic. The use of the term *lo stato* is older than Machiavelli, but in the way Machiavelli uses it, according to Arendt, it has nothing to do with "ancient or

⁸¹ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 3, p. 024016.

⁸² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. and trans. Peter Constantine (New York: Modern Library, 2007), ch. 3, p. 18.

fifteenth-century city-states.”⁸³ To found *lo stato* means to unify a nation—a people who live together and speak the same language—under one government, which exercises a monopoly of rule over a geographical territory. Therefore we might define a *stato*, Arendt writes, as “territory and People, represented in the State. As long as this people exists on this territory, there is Italy, the State—nation-state.” Though some form of rulership is present in *lo stato*, Arendt emphasizes that *lo stato* itself is not defined in terms of it. A *stato* such as “Italy” is supposed to endure even though different kinds of governments may rule it. A *stato* is destroyed, Arendt explains, not by a revolution or a transformation of government, but “only when the country is divided, i.e. when there are many governments in the same country, when the same people lives under different kinds of rule, or when foreigner[s] come in.”⁸⁴ Divided into several city-states, including the Papal territories, and overrun by the French and Spanish national monarchies, the Italian people, although one nation, do not have a *stato* and are easy prey to those who do.

Third, with the concept of *lo stato* we are faced with a decidedly public world that has its own morality. Arendt rejects the idea of *raison d'état* as an explanation of this morality, for “not the state, an institution, reasons, but Men.”⁸⁵ Men should reason, as Machiavelli put it in *The Prince*, that “in the actions of men, from which there is no appeal, one judges by the end result.”⁸⁶ Arendt hastens to add that this is not to say that

⁸³ Arendt, *OR*, p. 39.

⁸⁴ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 3, p. 024016.

⁸⁵ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 2, p. 024015.

⁸⁶ Arendt, *Cornell*, image 5, p. 023457. Arendt is quoting from chapter 18 of *The Prince*, but she has altered the Modern Library translation, which reads: “and in the actions of men, and especially of princes, from which there is no appeal, the end justifies the means [*si guarda al fine*].” In an entry in her *Denktagebuch* from April 1951 (*DI*, p. 70), Arendt copied down the Modern Library translation without any alterations, and she almost always quotes from this work. In her 1965 lecture notes on Machiavelli, however, Arendt translates *si guarda al fine* more accurately as “one judges by the end result.”

the end justifies the means, “as though I had an end in view before I started and now need [to] justify the means.”⁸⁷ What judging by the end result means for Arendt is that (1) there is no last judgment; everything is being judged here and now,⁸⁸ (2) there is no appeal to hidden intentions or to the soul to justify one’s actions;⁸⁹ (3) because end results are public, as Maurizio Viroli once put it, they “are by their nature subject to contrasting interpretations and assessments”;⁹⁰ and most importantly, (4) judging the end result or the outcome of an action means that what matters is whether it turned out to be good or bad for “Italy or the State or the realm of the Secular or the World.”⁹¹ In short, what is subject to judgment is what appears in and what happens to the world. The political question is always whether the result is good for the glory or greatness of the world—never mind what is good for the individual’s soul. This standard of morality comes into conflict with Christian morality that looks to what is good for the soul.⁹²

When asked to clarify her apparent endorsement in *The Human Condition* of Machiavelli’s idea of “glory” as a standard by which one should judge political activity, Arendt replied:

Whether the criterion [for evaluating political action] is glory—the shining out in the space of appearances—or whether the criterion is justice, that is not the decisive thing. The decisive thing is whether your own motivation is clear—for the world—or, for yourself, by which I mean for your soul. That is the way Machiavelli put it when he said, ‘I love my country, Florence, more than I love my eternal salvation.’ That doesn’t mean he didn’t believe in an after-life. But it meant that the world as such is of greater interest to me than myself, my physical as well as my soul self.

⁸⁷ Arendt, *Cornell*, image 5, p. 023457.

⁸⁸ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 8, p. 024021.

⁸⁹ Arendt, *Cornell*, image 5, p. 023457.

⁹⁰ Maurizio Viroli, *Redeeming The Prince: The Meaning of Machiavelli’s Masterpiece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 89.

⁹¹ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 8, p. 024021.

⁹² Arendt, *CR*, p. 153.

You know that in modern republics religion has become a private affair. And actually Machiavelli was arguing that it be private: Don't let these people into politics! They don't care enough for the world! People who believe that the world is mortal and they themselves are immortal, are very dangerous characters because we want the stability and good order of this world.⁹³

In these words, Arendt insists that Machiavelli's opposition to the Church and its Christian content is not a sign of an atheist or skeptic or even a pagan way of thinking, but of a patriot and lover of the world deeply troubled by the interference of *homo religiosus* in political matters. As Arendt put the point in *The Human Condition*: "Goodness, therefore, as a consistent way of life, is not only impossible within the confines of the public realm, it is even destructive of it. Nobody perhaps has been more sharply aware of this ruinous quality of doing good than Machiavelli, who, in a famous passage, dared to teach men 'how not to be good.'"⁹⁴

Machiavelli's Love of the World

In Arendt's time, Machiavelli was commonly considered a pagan or an anti-Christian teacher of evil. Arendt's argument against the textbook image of Machiavelli as an "anti-Christ" is that Machiavelli's contempt for his soul, his willingness to end up in Hell, attests to his love of the world, and it is a mistake to interpret this as the simple negation or rejection of Christian goodness. What the anti-Christian accounts of Machiavelli obscure, Arendt argues, is the "grandeur" of a man who prophetically imagines the liberation of Italy from the barbarians and is willing to sacrifice both his earthly life *and* his eternal life for the sake of the future of Italy.⁹⁵

⁹³ Arendt, *Toronto*, pp. 310-311.

⁹⁴ Arendt, *HC*, p. 77.

⁹⁵ Arendt, *Machiavelli*, image 12, p. 024025.

Arendt appreciates, and wants her readers to appreciate, Machiavelli as a man who loved the world more than his own soul, and was willing to accept the consequences. Machiavelli's famous letter in which he tells his friend Vettori that he loves his native city more than his own soul, Arendt insists, is not the declaration of an atheist who denies the existence of God or the immortality of the soul.⁹⁶ Rather, "the expression . . . meant literally one was prepared to forfeit an everlasting life or to risk the punishments of hell for the sake of one's city."⁹⁷ Machiavelli was not arguing against Christians who love God more than anything else. He was making a point, on Arendt's reading, about what it takes to devote one's life to politics. "The question, as Machiavelli saw it, was not whether one loved God more than the world, but whether one was capable of loving the world more than one's own self."⁹⁸ The question, in other words, is whether one wants to do "good" in the Christian sense or act politically. If one wants to do good, one should be concerned with one's self. If one wants to act politically, one should be concerned with the world, and one should have the courage to risk one's own life for the sake of improving the world.

Machiavelli's love of Italy more than his soul, his attention to political power and the primacy of politics in his works, his recovery of the Roman experience of founding a new body politic, and his concept of *lo stato* all indeed prompt Arendt to situate him against, and to some extent outside, the Platonic tradition. On Arendt's reading of Machiavelli, politics is a realm of greatness and splendor into which one rises by courageously leaving the security and low condition of private life, and this view of

⁹⁶ Arendt, *OR*, p. 286n20.

⁹⁷ Arendt, *OR*, p. 286n20.

⁹⁸ Arendt, *OR*, p. 286n20.

politics contrasts sharply with the downward degradation of politics into the necessities of life in the Platonic and Christian traditions. What is absolutely crucial to understand about the realm of politics, Arendt's Machiavelli teaches us, is that it exists as a space for people to be concerned about the world. I analyze Arendt's concept of the world (which she derives from Heidegger) in much greater detail in chapter 4. In this chapter we have seen that Arendt finds inspiration for her conception of the world in Machiavelli's works, especially in his notion of *lo stato*. For Arendt, Machiavelli trusted that once the political realm had been established by force and fraud, it could become, with the proper care and support, ordered and stable enough to house political action among a plurality of men.

Isaiah Berlin's Machiavellian Moment

"The Originality of Machiavelli," the long footnote-heavy essay that established Isaiah Berlin's influential position on Machiavelli as uncovering two real but incompatible systems of value, as well as Machiavelli's position as a neo-pagan moralist and monist, probably goes back to his days at Oxford in the late 1920s and early 1930s. We can only say "probably" because, when recounting his own intellectual trajectory, Berlin attributes his first realization of the possibility of conflict between true ends of life to his student days at Oxford, reading either Machiavelli or Vico.⁹⁹ Both Italian writers made a profound impression on Berlin's outlook on the Western tradition; he wrote long essays on both of them, and it would be idle to seek to identify one or the other as the original source of his disillusionment and rejection of monism. Plumping for his story of encountering Machiavelli before he encountered Vico in the early 1930s, I focus here on

⁹⁹ Berlin was introduced to Vico in the early 1930s by the philosopher R. G. Collingwood, who translated Croce's book on Vico in 1913. See Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, p. 58 and Berlin, *POI*, p. 7. In *POI*, Berlin says he encountered Machiavelli before Vico. In *MIP* Berlin mentions Vico but not Machiavelli.

Berlin's Machiavellian moment: his shock at awakening to the possibility, upon reading Machiavelli, that not all ultimate values are in principle compatible, and in choosing between them one may have to accept the unavoidable loss of entire moral worlds.

By the time he took up his new duties as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford in October of 1957, Berlin had already come to the conclusion that there were three "great crises" or turning-points in the history of political thought: "(1) Between Aristotle and the Stoics, (2) Machiavelli, [and] (3) the eighteenth-century Germans."¹⁰⁰ For the 1962 Storrs Lectures at Yale, Berlin delivered a lecture on each of these turning points.¹⁰¹ On March 26, 1963, at Exeter College, at the annual conference of the Political Studies Association of the UK, Berlin delivered a paper on "The Impact of Machiavelli on the History of Political Ideas," which was probably a longer version of his Storrs lecture.¹⁰² In 1969, Berlin delivered his by now greatly expanded Machiavelli lecture in Florence at the Quincentenary celebration of Machiavelli's birth organized by Harvard's Center for Italian Renaissance Studies. After the conference he wrote to Andrej Walicki in October of 1969 complaining that Machiavelli's ideas were "scarcely discussed" by the participants who were "dedicated to pure scholarship such as the question of whether Gentillet wrote or did not write a given letter on the basis of his having seen a man who perhaps may or may not have seen Cardinal Pole in Rome and

¹⁰⁰ Letter to Morton White, April 21, 1958, in *Enlightening*, p. 623. Berlin's three Storrs lectures were eventually published as *BGI*, *NM*, and *TRR*.

¹⁰¹ A text of Berlin's Storrs lecture on Machiavelli, "Three Turning-Points in Political Thought: 2. Machiavelli" (1962), is posted on *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*, ed. Henry Hardy. <<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/machiavelli.pdf>>.

¹⁰² See the note about the conference in *Political Studies* 11:1 (February 1963). The same note indicates that Bernard Crick was scheduled to speak that day as well. Crick mentions his debt to Berlin's unpublished paper on Machiavelli in his introduction to Machiavelli's *Discourses*, trans. Leslie J. Walker, rev. Brian Richardson (New York: Penguin, 1970), p. 15n1.

that sort of thing.”¹⁰³ Berlin’s “Originality,” along with other papers delivered in Florence, was published in 1972 in *Studies on Machiavelli*, edited by Berlin’s friend, Myron P. Gilmore.¹⁰⁴ Subsequently, Berlin’s essay has been republished with minor changes by Henry Hardy in *Against the Current* (Princeton, 2001).¹⁰⁵ Given Berlin’s long preoccupation with Machiavelli, it is surprising how poorly understood his view of Machiavelli is and how little it is discussed in the growing scholarship on Berlin’s works.¹⁰⁶

This brief account of the publication history of “Originality,” Berlin’s one and only work on Machiavelli, suggests a real interest in understanding Machiavelli and the

¹⁰³ Berlin, *LAW*, p. 76.

¹⁰⁴ Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *Studies on Machiavelli*, ed. Myron P. Gilmore (Florence, 1972), pp. 149-206. Part of “Originality” was published under the title “The Question of Machiavelli” in November 1971 in *The New York Review of Books*. “An Exchange on Machiavelli” between Kenneth Burke and Isaiah Berlin was published in the April 6, 1972 issue of *The New York Review of Books*. The published versions of “Originality” (in *Studies on Machiavelli* and *Against the Current*) contain an error in the first footnote: “the first draft of this paper was read at a meeting of the British section of the Political Studies Association in 1953.” 1953 is a typo. Berlin read a draft of his Machiavelli paper at the PSA in 1963 as the note in *Political Studies* indicates. There is no evidence of an earlier reading at the PSA, and while the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, surely Berlin did not give the same paper in 1953 and 1963!

¹⁰⁵ All quotations from “The Originality of Machiavelli” are to this version (abbreviated *NM*) unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰⁶ The exceptions are John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Alan Ryan, “Isaiah Berlin: Political Theory and Liberal Culture,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999), pp. 350-55. Berlin’s essay has received much more attention in Machiavelli studies. See, e.g., John H. Geerken, “Machiavelli Studies Since 1969,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 37:2 (April-June 1976), pp. 365-367; Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 249-54; Carlo Ginzburg, “Machiavelli, the Exception and the Rule: Notes from Research in Progress,” in *Renaissance Letters and Learning: In Memoriam Giovanni Aquilecchia*, eds. Dilwyn Knox and Nuccio Ordine, Warburg Institute Colloquia 19 (The Warburg Institute, 2012), pp. 73-91; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Vol. 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 134-35; J. N. Stephens, “Ciceronian rhetoric and the immorality of Machiavelli’s Prince,” *Renaissance Studies* 2:2 (October 1988), pp. 258-267; James Hankins, “Humanism and the origins of modern political thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, edited by Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 136; J. Patrick Coby, *Machiavelli’s Romans* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), pp. 218-220, 329; Anthony J. Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 94-95; Michael Freeden, “Editorial: The ‘Beginning of Ideology’ Thesis,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 4:1 (February 1999), pp. 5-11; Hanna F. Pitkin does not cite or mention Berlin in her *Fortune is a Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), but she seems to understand and agree with Berlin’s portrayal of Machiavelli on pp. 5-6.

critical impact of his thought in the history of Western political thought. However, unlike his other essays on various thinkers which focus on the dilemmas that *their* ideas were conceived to resolve, “Originality” is unique in that it is concerned not with Machiavelli’s but with *our* dilemma when *we* read Machiavelli’s *Prince*, *Discourses*, *Mandragola*, etc. Unlike Arendt, Berlin found himself shocked and profoundly upset by Machiavelli’s works, and in agreement with Friedrich Meinecke, Berlin believed that Machiavelli had this shocking effect not just on him, but on the European tradition itself, specifically with respect to Christian morality.¹⁰⁷ Taking the shock and horror attending Machiavelli’s writings from his century to ours as indicative of something truly new and startling in Machiavelli’s works, Berlin devoted his efforts to answering the question: “What was it that was so upsetting in the views of Machiavelli?”¹⁰⁸

In a critical review of Berlin’s work, Perry Anderson accuses Berlin of projecting his own shocking encounter with Machiavelli onto centuries of often highly polemical interpretations of Machiavelli that are clearly not scandalized, as Berlin seems to be, by Machiavelli’s implicit juxtaposition of pagan and Christian virtues.¹⁰⁹ Although this may be a common perception of Berlin’s argument, it is highly misleading. Berlin’s argument is not that the juxtaposition of two conflicting sets of virtues in Machiavelli’s works is itself scandalous; his argument is that by putting forward pagan virtues in a Christian civilization, Machiavelli left his readers who accepted the validity of his political

¹⁰⁷ See Berlin, *TRR*, p. 169, *BGI*, p. 293 and *NM*, pp. 26, 66.

¹⁰⁸ Berlin, *NM*, p. 39. In his 1949 paper on Machiavelli, Maurice Merleau-Ponty likewise wonders “How could he have been understood?” He claims that Machiavelli has been “reproached for...the idea that history is a struggle and [that] politics [is] a relationship to men rather than principles.” Merleau-Ponty, “A Note on Machiavelli,” in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Northwestern: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 211, 219.

¹⁰⁹ Perry Anderson, “England’s Isaiah,” *London Review of Books* 12:24, December 20, 1990, reprinted as “The Pluralism of Isaiah Berlin” in his *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 232.

analysis, yet also believed in Christian morality, with an “insoluble” dilemma: both moral systems cannot logically and morally be affirmed at the same time, yet both have been and still are sacred and worthy ideals of social life.¹¹⁰ Berlin is very careful not to confuse Machiavelli’s political position and outlook, which is entirely pagan, with how commentators over the centuries have tried to explain or explain away this outlook. The originality and significance of Berlin’s essay consists not so much in his portrayal of Machiavelli as a pagan, as in his staging of a tragic conflict between Machiavelli and modern European civilization based on Christian morality, and suggesting that the history of Machiavelli’s reception consists of so many attempts to escape from or dilute or otherwise come to terms with the fact that both pagan and Christian virtues are of real value, but as ultimate systems of value they are incompatible and incommensurable and we must (as we in fact have historically) learn to live with both in a logically and morally uncomfortable way.

Machiavelli’s Non-Liberal, Non-Christian, Aristotelian “Social Morality”

It is important to be clear at the outset, because it is the most common misunderstanding, that Berlin does *not* characterize Machiavelli as a liberal for whom the individual inhabits two discontinuous spheres of life, public and private, with two corresponding moralities, a public, political morality that pertains to the duties of individuals as rulers and citizens, and a morality (such as Christianity) that pertains to the private aspect of the individual’s good that remains outside of politics. Berlin’s thesis about Machiavelli is often and easily confused with this liberal common sense because Berlin himself often uses the language of private versus public moralities, saying such things as: “public life has its own

¹¹⁰ Berlin, *NM*, p. 77.

morality”;¹¹¹ “There are two worlds, that of personal morality and that of public organization”;¹¹² and twice quoting L. Arthur Burd’s saying that “a state and a people are governed in a different way from an individual.”¹¹³ Seizing on such language, commentators have confused Berlin’s interpretation of Machiavelli with one of the interpretations of Machiavelli that he rejects, namely that Machiavelli recognized the validity of Christian morality for ordinary citizens but announced in the central chapters of *The Prince* a new political ethic for founders and princes. This is a common view of Machiavelli, it is also very close to Arendt’s view, but it is not Berlin’s.

Berlin tries (but occasionally fails) to avoid the language of public versus private morality because it wrongly suggests a division of ethics from politics, which in turn wrongly suggests that Machiavelli himself endorses or advances a double standard of morality. It is of course true that Berlin speaks about two moralities, pagan and Christian. But he does not think that “pagan” morality maps onto the public political realm while “Christian” morality maps onto the private realm. The frightening feature of Machiavelli’s work in Berlin’s view is that “pagan” seems to map onto everything, public and private. Berlin’s view is that Machiavelli is a pagan moralist who conveys the ideal of *one* standard of morality, one set of virtues that alone generates the kind of life and the kind of human beings that Machiavelli thought desirable to generate.

Berlin acknowledges that Machiavelli of course recognizes that Christian morality exists and cannot be wished away, and he is well aware that Machiavelli does not live in ancient Athens or Rome but in Renaissance Italy. Berlin would be the first to say, as he

¹¹¹ Berlin, *NM*, p. 66.

¹¹² Berlin, *NM*, p. 58.

¹¹³ Berlin, *NM*, pp. 60, 72, quoting L. Burd’s edition of *The Prince* (Oxford, 1891), p. 28.

did in his reply to Kenneth Burke, that “Machiavelli does not seem to me to hold a realistic position.”¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, against a great many scholars who have represented Machiavelli as a man indifferent to morality who taught that “politics” and “morality” are incompatible or that there is a special political ethic incompatible with ordinary ethics, Berlin emphasizes repeatedly that Machiavelli’s vision of a strong and well-governed society is a vision saturated with one and only one morality for everybody—pagan morality. “[T]he world of Pericles or of Scipio, or even of the Duke of Valentino,” Berlin writes,

[is] a society geared to ends just as ultimate as the Christian faith, a society in which men fight and are ready to die for (public) ends which they pursue for their own sakes. They [Pericles et al.] are choosing not a realm of means (called politics) as opposed to a realm of ends (called morals), but opt for a rival (Roman or classical) morality, an alternative realm of ends....Like Aristotle’s or Cicero’s, Machiavelli’s morality was social and not individual: but it is a morality no less than theirs, not an amoral region, beyond good and evil.¹¹⁵

Harkening back to Aristotle and Cicero, Berlin’s Machiavelli believes that humans “are beings made by nature to live in communities, their communal purposes are the ultimate values from which the rest are derived,” and participating in them is “intrinsic to living a successful human life.”¹¹⁶ Thus the idea advanced by Croce that politics is “beyond good and evil,” Berlin writes, is true only “in some non-Aristotelian, religious or liberal-Kantian sense.”¹¹⁷ Politics is not beyond “the good and evil of those

¹¹⁴ Berlin’s reply to Kenneth Burke, *The New York Review of Books* 18:6 (April 6, 1972).

¹¹⁵ Berlin, *NM*, pp. 54-56. See also p. 64n1.

¹¹⁶ Berlin, *NM*, p. 53.

¹¹⁷ Berlin, *NM*, p. 53.

communities, ancient or modern, whose sacred values are social through and through.”¹¹⁸ Machiavelli, in short, “thinks that morals are, so to speak, a branch of politics, exactly as Aristotle did.”¹¹⁹ There is no question of a double standard of morality in Berlin’s reading of Machiavelli because, as Arendt explains, a double standard arises in Western thought “only when ethics or morality is not identified with public as in Aristotle.”¹²⁰

Berlin describes Machiavelli’s pagan morality as an “Aristotelian morality”¹²¹ or, more commonly, a “social morality.” Social morality, as Berlin applies the concept to Machiavelli, is meant only to convey the idea that Machiavelli’s pagan morality applies to rulers and ruled alike as parts of a whole way of life that Machiavelli upholds as the perfect and ideal form of life. Like Berlin’s use of the term “monism,” the term “social morality” is a way of emphasizing a social whole that is more fundamental than its parts, in this case, individuals and their liberty and private interests. In other words, Berlin uses the notion of “social morality” to say that Machiavelli’s general view of life does not supply any reasons for commentators to mark as ethically significant a divide or discontinuity between a public and a private sphere, for “the pagan world that Machiavelli prefers is built on recognition of the need for systematic guile and force by rulers, and he seems to think it natural and not at all exceptional or morally agonizing that they should employ these weapons wherever they are needed. Nor is the distinction he

¹¹⁸ Berlin, *NM*, p. 53.

¹¹⁹ Letter to Jean Floud, September 18, 1970, *Building*, p. 34.

¹²⁰ Arendt, *Cornell*, image 6, p. 023458.

¹²¹ Berlin, *BGI*, p. 302.

draws that between the rulers and the ruled. The subjects or citizens must be Romans too.”¹²²

Berlin understands “society” similar to the way Arendt theorizes *lo stato*—it includes a people and a territory and a system of government. Like Arendt’s interpretation of *stato*, Machiavelli’s social morality on Berlin’s interpretation is opposed to the Church in Rome and its Christian morality. Like Arendt’s *stato*, Berlin’s idea of a pagan social morality is also an idea he created for his own purposes. In Berlin’s case the purpose is to furnish Machiavelli with a moral point of view in which pagan Rome is not a pestilential swamp of human sinfulness but the greatest society ever created by virtue of the *virtù* of the greatest men ever to have lived. Berlin is simply trying to explain how someone in modernity could admire ancient Roman politics from a moral perspective, and to do this he believes that he must invoke the notion of an Aristotelian or Ciceronian social morality in order to distinguish Machiavelli’s outlook as sharply as he can from Christianity.

Consider, for example, Susan Mendus’s Isaiah Berlin Lecture, “Saving One’s Soul or Founding a State: Morality and Politics.”¹²³ Mendus tries to use Berlin’s interpretation of Machiavelli to challenge modern liberal pluralists by drawing attention to the “deep pluralism” implied by Machiavelli’s advocacy of a pagan morality in a Christian civilization.¹²⁴ But she undermines the very idea of “deep pluralism” and gets Berlin’s interpretation of Machiavelli wrong by interpreting Machiavelli within a liberal

¹²² Berlin, *NM*, p. 55.

¹²³ Susan Mendus, “Saving One’s Soul or Founding a State: Morality and Politics,” *Philosophia* 34 (2006), pp. 233-241.

¹²⁴ Susan Mendus, “Saving One’s Soul...,” p. 234.

framework as teaching us about “the values of politics itself.”¹²⁵ On Berlin’s account, however, Machiavelli does not teach us about the “values of politics itself” as opposed to the values of other nonpolitical activities; he teaches us about the values of a glorious pagan society and pagan way of life in which the individual’s good is inseparable from the social or public good. For Machiavelli, Berlin argues, it is not just statesmen but *everyone* who naturally, normally, and wisely wishes to found, maintain, or serve a great and glorious state.¹²⁶ To be sure, Berlin writes in places that Machiavelli’s *advice* is meant for princes and statesmen.¹²⁷ But Berlin never says that *pagan virtues* are meant only for princes and statesmen—on the contrary, such virtues are for everyone.

The irony of associating Machiavelli with liberalism of any sort, Berlin notes, is that Machiavelli surely would have condemned liberalism “as feeble and characterless, lacking in single-minded pursuit of power, in splendour, in organization, in *virtù*, in power to discipline unruly men against huge odds into one energetic whole.”¹²⁸ For Berlin, Machiavelli’s political vision is of a grandiose, powerful, energetic social whole as judged by the worldly standards of the ancient Roman Republic. Machiavelli’s central “thesis,” according to Berlin, emerges from this vision of a society that measures up to ancient Roman standards: such a society can be recreated and maintained today only if men possess the qualities—the virtues—of the ancient pagans, and these qualities “are not compatible with those that are urged upon them by Christian education.”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Susan Mendus, “Saving One’s Soul...,” p. 234.

¹²⁶ See, e.g., Berlin, *NM*, p. 50.

¹²⁷ See, e.g., Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 57

¹²⁸ Berlin, *NM*, p. 79.

¹²⁹ Berlin, *NM*, pp. 65, 49.

Machiavelli and Christianity

Machiavelli's *Discourses* treat the Christian religion as a form of education that has diminished the *virtù* and political-theoretical imagination of his contemporaries. However, Berlin downplays Machiavelli's criticisms of Christianity and the Church in Rome because he wishes to portray Machiavelli as a man with a pagan outlook who sought to revive the glory of Rome. If Machiavelli gave Christianity any "serious thought," Berlin writes, he would have dismissed it as "Utopian."¹³⁰ But he did not give it serious thought: "He seems wholly unworried by, indeed scarcely aware of, parting company with traditional western morality."¹³¹ Elsewhere Berlin writes, "Machiavelli does not formally condemn Christian morality, or the approved values of his own society."¹³² Berlin states repeatedly that Machiavelli took so little interest in Christianity that he really did not make a "choice" for paganism over Christianity with all the "agony" that such a choice would have involved.¹³³ He simply "[took] for granted the obvious superiority of classical civic virtue and brushes aside Christian values, as well as conventional morality, with a disparaging or patronizing sentence or two, or smooth words about the misinterpretation of Christianity."¹³⁴

And yet, for all of Machiavelli's alleged lack of interest in Christianity, Berlin, like Arendt, recognizes that Christian morality was not simply a "choice ignored" by

¹³⁰ Berlin, *NM*, p. 49. As Mark Hulliung astutely notes, "The fire and ice of Machiavelli's statements on Christianity are absent from the interpretation of Isaiah Berlin" (Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 253).

¹³¹ Berlin, *NM*, p. 71.

¹³² Berlin, *NM*, p. 48.

¹³³ Berlin, *NM*, p. 70.

¹³⁴ Berlin, *NM*, p. 75.

Machiavelli.¹³⁵ Machiavelli's interest in Christian morality is considerable, even on Berlin's own account, and it comes from the fact that Christianity is an outlook or system of values that "unfits" men for politics.¹³⁶ Like Arendt, Berlin interprets Machiavelli as rejecting the Christian conception of "goodness" as unfit for the creation and maintenance of "a strong, secure and vigorous society."¹³⁷ Far from ignoring Christianity, Machiavelli "points out that in our world men who pursue such ideals are bound to be defeated and to lead other people to ruin, since their view of the world is not founded upon the truth, at least not upon *verità effettuale*—the truth that is tested by success and experience—which (however cruel) is always, in the end, less destructive than the other (however noble)."¹³⁸ Indeed, for Berlin's Machiavelli, the practice of Christian morality "makes it impossible to build a society which, once it is contemplated, in the pages of history or by the political imagination, will surely awaken in us—in any man—a great longing."¹³⁹ Thus, like Arendt, Berlin too comprehends Machiavelli's thought as possessing significance in relation to "a Christian civilization," which consists of the values of "charity, mercy, sacrifice, love of God, forgiveness of enemies, contempt for the goods of this world, faith in the life hereafter, belief in the salvation of the individual soul as being of incomparable value."¹⁴⁰ To Machiavelli, in Berlin's view, those who practice such morality must "not [be] allowed to meddle with politics or education or any

¹³⁵ Berlin, *NM*, p. 70.

¹³⁶ Berlin, *NM*, p. 75.

¹³⁷ Berlin, *NM*, p. 49.

¹³⁸ Berlin, *NM*, p. 49.

¹³⁹ Berlin, *NM*, p. 49.

¹⁴⁰ Berlin, *NM*, pp. 63, 45.

of the cardinal factors in human life” because all they care about is personal salvation and not order and greatness in this world.¹⁴¹

To be sure, one could read the foregoing paragraph as evidence that Berlin reads Machiavelli in terms of a double standard of morality, one for private life that is concerned with the salvation of the soul, and one in public life that is concerned with the safety and greatness of the city. But Berlin would remind us that while Machiavelli recognizes Christian morality, he is not advocating a double standard as part of his moral ideal. Berlin’s Machiavelli believes that there is a single pagan morality that prescribes the best way to live, and humans are free to choose not to follow it, “but only to their doom.”¹⁴² As a pagan monist, Machiavelli breaks from what Berlin calls “the Platonic-Hebraic-Christian” way of thinking and acting, which assumes that “virtuous rulers create virtuous men.”¹⁴³ This, Machiavelli believes, is an “illusion” in the sense that those who believe in it “must abandon all hope of a tolerable life on earth...[for] they will not survive collectively.”¹⁴⁴ For Machiavelli, on Berlin’s account, “the benefactors of men”—founders, educators, legislators, rulers—must use cruel and evil means, cruel and evil according to Christian standards, “to provide good results, good in terms not of a Christian, but of a secular, humanistic, naturalistic morality.”¹⁴⁵

Berlin’s point is that, in Machiavelli’s view, there are cases when actions are justified even though they would not be justified but deemed “immoral” from the standpoint of Christian morality, and he does not deny this; he never calls good evil or

¹⁴¹ Berlin, *NM*, p. 75.

¹⁴² Berlin, *NM*, p. 67. See also p. 43.

¹⁴³ Berlin, *NM*, p. 59.

¹⁴⁴ Berlin, *NM*, pp. 59, 58.

¹⁴⁵ Berlin, *NM*, pp. 51, 59.

evil good.¹⁴⁶ On Berlin's reading, Machiavelli recognizes that there is a Christian framework in which such actions are not justified, but he believes that they are justified in terms of a pagan moral framework. Machiavelli recognizes, at least implicitly, that there are conflicting attitudes toward the use of violence to achieve social and political ends, and Berlin calls this recognition "the nodal point of Machiavelli's entire conception."¹⁴⁷

It is crucial to understand that the nodal point or principal difficulty of Machiavelli's conception is not a difficulty for Machiavelli; it is a difficulty for his readers. If we decide that the employment of violent means in politics is justified for the sake of achieving glory and greatness, then must we ignore conventional, Christian morality as irrelevant or an impediment to successful politics? If we condemn the use of violent means in politics in the name of Christian morality, then must we forget about achieving a great and enduring political order patterned after ancient Rome? Berlin argues that interpreters since Machiavelli's time have tied themselves in knots trying to dissolve or escape these questions. But in so doing, according to Berlin, they have labored under the delusion that this is a dilemma that can be solved, as if there were one correct view or answer. The dilemma of Machiavelli does not admit of a solution, Berlin argues, because Machiavelli uncovers two equally valid and ultimate ways of life, two sets of moral virtues, which cannot be reconciled or squared, at least in principle and in their pure forms.

Machiavelli and the Troubling Experience of Value Pluralism

¹⁴⁶ This was one of Meinecke's main points. See *Machiavellism*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁷ Berlin, *NM*, p. 44.

Berlin's proposition is that the shocking originality of Machiavelli pertains to the existence and experience of two equally ultimate but incompatible moral outlooks and standards of goodness. This is a potentially terrifying proposition because it means that Machiavelli's doctrines cannot be explained away by saying, with James Hankins, for example, that we are not confronted with a different system of values because "there was no pagan code of morality that sanctioned vice in the interests of political power," and all Machiavelli has really achieved is the recognition of "the moral heteronomy of ends and means: that not all good ends can be secured by good means, that not all good means issue in good ends."¹⁴⁸ By speaking of politics in terms of "moral heteronomy," Hankins attempts to dissolve the dilemma of Machiavelli: there is one and only one morality, Christianity, and to bring about morally good results political actors sometimes have to depart from that morality, and vice versa, by acting in morally acceptable ways a political actor might bring about morally unacceptable or ruinous results. This is merely a description of what Max Weber famously called "the ethical irrationality of the world," the experience of which he argued was quite common and was "the driving force of all religious evolution."¹⁴⁹ Machiavelli would certainly agree with this, but the question of Machiavelli, according to Berlin, is deeper than the experience of the ethical irrationality of the world.

For Berlin, Machiavelli reveals a universe of ultimate ends, paganism, which is incompatible with Christianity, and so by its very existence it complicates our choices

¹⁴⁸ James Hankins, "Humanism and the origins of modern political thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. by Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 136.

¹⁴⁹ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 122.

about how to live even if it did not trouble Machiavelli. “[T]o preach paganism more than a thousand years after the triumph of Christianity,” Berlin writes, forces men “to make a conscious choice . . . a choice between two entire worlds. Men have lived in both, and fought and died to preserve them against each other.”¹⁵⁰ In describing the pagan virtues and ideals to which Machiavelli subscribes, Berlin always employs the language of choices and preferences even though he emphasizes that Machiavelli shows no sign of having made a conscious, agonizing choice in favor of pagan virtues. That a great and powerful state resembling the Roman Republic is the most desirable society attainable by humans seemed as obvious to Machiavelli as Rome’s inability to satisfy man’s permanent interests seemed obvious to St. Augustine after the sack of Rome in 410. For Berlin, the point is not about which of the two worlds, the pagan or the Christian one, is the real one that reflects and fulfills the permanent interests of human nature. That there can be no correct, rational answer to that question is the point. The point is that insofar as Machiavelli’s works uphold a pagan ideal, they confront us with the thought that “there are at least two worlds: each of them has much, indeed everything, to be said for it; but they are two and not one. One must learn to choose between them, and having chosen, not look back.”¹⁵¹

Again, in suggesting that one must choose between a Christian and pagan morality, Berlin is not saying, as Arendt does, that Machiavelli’s works confront us with the choice between doing “good” in a Christian sense and being “political” in a pagan sense. Rather, Machiavelli’s works confront us with a pagan social morality in which

¹⁵⁰ Berlin, *NM*, p. 63.

¹⁵¹ Berlin, *NM*, p. 59.

doing good and being political is the same thing. Of course neither Machiavelli nor Berlin were born into such a society. Berlin's point is that this is precisely why Machiavelli's work is tragic: he shows us that we have lost an entire moral world. The tragedy for us, Machiavelli's readers, is that we see value in both ways of life but are doomed to choose between them because they are irreconcilable.

Machiavelli's works have proved so scandalizing for centuries, Berlin argues, because European readers found themselves in agreement with much of his analysis of life, but they were not ready or willing to abandon their Christian moral values and ideals of life, and this put them in conflict with themselves.¹⁵² Commentators such as Croce have projected this conflict back onto Machiavelli, as if he were some "anguished" humanist.¹⁵³ If there is any anguish about Machiavelli, Berlin argues, it comes from his commentators, not him. Finding, like a scorpion, the poisoned pagan sting of Machiavelli's doctrines turned against their—our—morals, Machiavelli's commentators tend not to abandon their Christian morals but instead make an effort "to dilute his doctrines, or interpret them in such a way as to remove their sting."¹⁵⁴ According to Berlin's friend Stuart Hampshire, Quentin Skinner of the Cambridge school of history does just this in his *Machiavelli* (Oxford, 1981). In his review of Skinner titled "Machiavelli's Bite," Hampshire writes that he "underemphasises the threat to all established values which is conveyed by Machiavelli's worldliness: the tone is rather too

¹⁵² Berlin, *NM*, p. 70.

¹⁵³ Berlin, *NM*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁵⁴ Berlin, *NM*, p. 77.

calm, and the concluding paragraphs too judicious, to present vividly the shock and unease which still arise naturally around Machiavelli's name."¹⁵⁵

If we look back at Berlin's survey of the literature on Machiavelli in the first section of "Originality," we find him describing the ways in which commentators have sought to remove Machiavelli's sting or dilute his doctrines. Some say he was a satirist, "for he certainly cannot literally have meant what he said." Some say he was a peculiar sort of Christian. Others say he was trying to reveal what tyrants do the better to resist them. Still others see in Machiavelli "a morally neutral scientist" or an unrealistic "visionary" or "an aesthete seeking to escape from the chaotic and squalid world of the decadent Italy of his time into a dream of pure art," or a theorist of the state as a work of art. Many have confined Machiavelli to his own time and place as "a marvelous mirror of his age" or a man who understood "the demands of his own age." The most common view, of course, is that "he is a man inspired by the Devil to lead good men to their doom." This might be a stinging charge against Machiavelli, but it also removes any bite from Machiavelli's charge against Christian civilization, for who would take the judgments and view of life of such an evil person seriously?¹⁵⁶

By interpreting Machiavelli as a coherent if somewhat fanciful pagan monist, Berlin clearly aims to restore Machiavelli's sting in a way that cannot be diluted or explained away by relegating his thought to the realm of immorality or amorality or aesthetics or satire or the Renaissance. Machiavelli's sting is an ongoing threat. Berlin thus gives us, in his most biting formulation, a Machiavelli who speaks not just to his

¹⁵⁵ Stuart Hampshire, "Machiavelli's Bite," *London Review of Books* 3:18 (October 1, 1981), p. 18.

¹⁵⁶ See Berlin, *NM*, pp. 27-35.

own time but to ours, and tells people brought up in modern Europe “that what they have been taught for ages is not compatible with the *only* thing that is worth achieving, a glorious pagan State, and that common morality is not compatible with the *only* life worth leading for a fully developed man—my God! That is what people choose not to look at, even at the present, because people like to think that all good things can somehow be combined by skill, by good fortune, if not in this life, somewhere else, and this is what, if what Machiavelli says is true, cannot be so.”¹⁵⁷ How could a writer who says this not shock us?

Conclusion

In view of the simultaneous defeat and realization of the Western tradition’s monist approach to politics in totalitarian regimes, it is perhaps no surprise that Arendt and Berlin read Machiavelli in similar terms, as a figure that helps them think about what politics could become outside of or against the Western tradition. For Arendt, on the one hand, Machiavelli’s remarks on the process of founding a political realm (*lo stato*) reflect the deeply traditional, Platonic doctrine that the end justifies the means, including violent means. On the other hand, Arendt strains to interpret Machiavelli’s understanding of the political realm in a way that defeats the Platonic tradition by starting from the anti-Platonic and anti-Christian conviction that politics is valuable as an end in itself. Likewise, for Berlin, on the one hand, Machiavelli’s pagan monism is a form of monism that, like all monisms, claims to have the final solution to how men should live, and Machiavelli’s monism is certainly not an attractive view of life for modern liberals. On the other hand, Berlin strains to interpret Machiavelli’s monism in a way that defeats the

¹⁵⁷ Letter to Jean Floud, September 18, 1970, *Building*, pp. 434-35, my emphasis.

monist tradition, and finds the sword of which Meinecke speaks sufficient for that purpose. Thus Berlin adopts Meinecke's reading of Machiavelli's significance, but in a way that emphasizes the reality of value pluralism.

Ultimately, as I stated at the outset of this chapter, while reading Machiavelli Arendt and Berlin found themselves drawn to think about politics in a different way than had traditionally been done before, that is, in a way that was at odds with the Western—mainly the Platonic and Christian—tradition. As we know, Arendt deliberately set out to do this, while the shock of Machiavelli's originality seems to have caught Berlin unawares. Influenced by Meinecke's post-World War One portrait of Machiavelli's heathen idealism of the state, Arendt and Berlin both found Machiavelli's originality and importance to lie not in his questionable realism but, for Arendt, in his recovery of the Roman "pagan" experience of founding a political realm (*lo stato*), and for Berlin in his vision of the virtues, quality of men, and way of life required for founding and maintaining a strong and well-governed state patterned after the Roman Republic.

As we have seen, in the course of teaching her students the meaning of Machiavelli's notion of *lo stato*, Arendt ends up teaching them less about Machiavelli than about her own thoughts on post-totalitarian politics which were moving in the direction of understanding politics as a secular public space, founded outside and against the Church, where great deeds and words can appear, be seen, be remembered and be imitated. Inspired by Machiavelli's love of Italy (or "the world") and his vision of politics as a realm of greatness and splendor into which one rises by courageously leaving the security and low condition of private life—a view of politics that contrasts sharply with

the downward degradation of politics into the necessities of life in the Platonic and Christian traditions—Arendt would go on to theorize politics as concerned with the world and not the self, with men in the plural and not man in the singular. Similarly, in the course of his attempt to come to grips with the shock of Machiavelli's morality in which pagan Rome is not a depraved but an ideal society, Berlin ends up embracing Meinecke's view that Machiavelli effected a diremption of the monist tradition, and argues further, beyond Meinecke, that there is enough truth in what Machiavelli said to force us to confront the issue of a plurality of incompatible but equally ultimate ways of life. Berlin would go on to argue that if we take such value pluralism seriously we should become skeptical of definitive solutions in human affairs and realize that there is no one way to see the world. In the next chapter I examine their respective views of the human condition of plurality and pluralism in more detail.

CHAPTER 3

Plurality Rules the Earth

The topic of this chapter is the concept of human “plurality,” which is absolutely crucial for Arendt and Berlin’s understanding of politics, humanity, philosophy (or the Western tradition) and totalitarianism. However, the differences between Arendt and Berlin with respect to this topic run deep, starting with their vocabularies, distinctions and definitions.

Berlin speaks about “pluralism” with respect to values and cultures. Berlin never speaks of “plurality” except to refer at least once to a “plurality of values.”¹ Berlin is anxious to distinguish “pluralism” from “monism,” on the one hand, and “relativism,” on the other. In an essay on Herder he defines the topic of pluralism as follows: “*Pluralism*: the belief not merely in the multiplicity, but in the incommensurability,² of the values of different cultures and societies, and, in addition, in the incompatibility of equally valid ideals, together with the implied revolutionary corollary that the classical notions of an ideal man and of an ideal society are intrinsically incoherent and meaningless.”³ Berlin also emphasizes that pluralism is “objective” in the sense that it refers to a strictly finite number of distinct and irreconcilable ultimate “values,” “ideals,” or “ends of life” that are

¹ Berlin, *AR*, p. 79.

² Incommensurability does not entail relativism for Berlin. See Berlin, *AR*, esp. pp. 83-87. Berlin does not mean by incommensurable the idea that no common measure can serve as a bridge among different cultures or conceptual schemes. For a discussion of commensurability in this sense, see Brian Fay, “Do People in Different Cultures Live in Different Worlds?,” chapter 4 in *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: A Multicultural Approach* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 72-91.

³ Berlin, *VHH*, pp. 176-77.

circumscribed by human nature.⁴ To formulate Berlin's position in Arendtian terms: Berlin conceives of plurality as the anthropologically verifiable common sense fact that humans are all the same in the sense that they have some common needs, values, concepts, and categories that account for their common humanity, but they are also different because it is equally a part of their common human nature to pursue many different, distinct, and unpredictable—but equally valid and genuine—ultimate values, ends, purposes.

Arendt, by contrast, speaks of “plurality” always with the meaning of “human plurality” and never makes it an *ism*. “Plurality” refers to the factual, empirical or phenomenological existence and experience of a potentially infinite number of unique human beings. Arendt conceives of plurality as the fact that humans “are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”⁵ “Pluralism” for Arendt, as for midcentury American political scientists, refers to democratic theories of interest group pluralism, not Berlin's idea of “value pluralism.” Arendt is anxious to distinguish human plurality from other things that exist in the plural such as animals and trees.⁶ In the human world, Arendt argues, no “human” as such exists, “but only men and women who in their absolute distinctness are the same, that is, human, so this shared human sameness is the *equality* that in turn manifests itself only in the absolute *distinction* of one equal from another.”⁷ Equality and

⁴ See *Dialogue*, p. 203 and *CWSL*, pp. 100, 103-4.

⁵ Arendt, *HC*, p. 8.

⁶ Arendt, *FE*, p. 191. Although both humans and animals exist in the plural, human plurality is distinguished from the plurality of other creatures in that the plurality of human beings is not the result of the fabrication or multiplication of one model, essence, species, or nature. See Arendt, *HC*, pp. 7-8 and *IIP*, p. 176.

⁷ Arendt, *TPT*, p. 62.

distinction thus comprise the two-fold nature of human plurality, the “paradoxical plurality of unique beings.”⁸

What is most striking about Arendt and Berlin’s different views of human plurality is that plurality is intrinsically related to the existence of a universal or uniform human nature for Berlin, and the very absence or impossibility of such a thing for Arendt. This difference seems to be bound up with their respective understandings of the evil of totalitarian regimes. For Berlin, “man” or “human nature” is threatened by ideologies that divide “mankind” into “men proper, and some other, lower, order of beings,” and aim to eliminate the lower orders, and it is no coincidence that this is the aim of totalitarianism on Berlin’s account.⁹ If their being fused together, so to speak, into one Man, undermines the absolute distinctness and equality of human beings, then it is no surprise to find in Arendt’s account in “Ideology and Terror” that this is the aim of totalitarianism. In both Arendt and Berlin’s case, however, it is not clear if dwelling on the horrors of totalitarianism led them to change or reassess their views about human plurality, or if their contemplation of human plurality led them to reassess their views about the horror of totalitarianism. Nevertheless, given Arendt’s emphasis on responding to events rather than to ideas, I’m inclined to believe that her philosophy of pluralism took shape in the course of her attempt to come to grips with the horrors of totalitarianism in the 1940s and 50s. Whereas I’m inclined to think that Berlin’s idea of pluralism shaped the way he thought about totalitarianism in the 1950s and beyond.

⁸ See Arendt, *HC*, pp. 8n1 and pp. 175-76. This is not to say that equality and distinction alone distinguish humans from non-human animals. Arendt also believes that “Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others” (*HC*, pp. 22-23).

⁹ Berlin, *EUV*, p. 179.

In this chapter, then, I aim to show that Arendt's conceptualization of human plurality was one of the features of her thought that changed between the publication of *Origins* and *The Human Condition*. I wish to contend that Arendt arrived at her particular concept of plurality after *Origins* in the course of further reflection on two questions: the question of the essence or nature of the totalitarian form of government as a form of government, and the question of the relationship between totalitarian rule and the Western tradition of political philosophy. The ultimate upshot of her further reflections on pluralism in the light of totalitarianism and the breakdown of the tradition is an experimental political philosophy based on human plurality.

In Berlin's case, I argue that he understands pluralism as both a historical development and as a natural phenomenon. He wields his theory of pluralism against any sort of monist, dogmatic Marxist, or *a priori* rationalist assumption of one final, true way of living, as well as against what he calls neo-Calvinist or anti-humanist ideologies, including totalitarianism, that divide mankind into humans and sub-humans and aim to eliminate the sub-humans. Berlin's historically emergent romantic conception of pluralism, combined with his humanist view of the unity of mankind, ultimately leads him to classify totalitarianism as a form of anti-humanism which he then attempts to combat by reaffirming the romantic humanist assumptions of the Western tradition.

Identifying Berlin's Idea of Pluralism

Although commentators have presented Berlin's idea of the objective plurality or pluralism of values as his "big" contribution,¹⁰ and given it a label, "value pluralism,"

¹⁰ See, e.g., Chandran Kukathas's review of John Gray's *Isaiah Berlin*, "What's the Big Idea?," *Reason Magazine* (November 1996), <<http://reason.com/9611/bk.kukathas.shtml>>.

that he did not use, it remains a frustratingly cryptic, allusive, and, above all, ambiguous idea, and for good reason. As the Canadian feminist philosopher Louise Marcil-Lacoste observed in an insightful critical discussion of “the paradoxes of pluralism,” insofar as pluralism is conceptualized within and against monism, which is the case in Berlin’s work and in the history of Western philosophy in general, it is far more effective in refuting monism’s obliteration of pluralities than in “positively conceptualizing plurality.”¹¹

Marcil-Lacoste identifies three ambiguities that beset virtually every variety of pluralism in political theory. First, there is ambiguity regarding pluralism as a “fact” (it exists) and “norm” (it should be promoted and treated as a value or end in itself). Second, there is the ambiguity of the “overfull” (a potential abundance of particulars) and the “empty” (nothing specific is said about the positive nature or content of the particulars). Third, there is ambiguity regarding pluralism as a “critique” (of monist politics) and as an “evasion” (of conflict in politics, which has no positive aim other than the instrumental one of managing and making room for conflicts without transforming or addressing any specific one). This threefold ambiguity surrounds Berlin’s idea of pluralism too.

The critique-evasion ambiguity is plain enough: Berlin’s pluralist idea of many equally ultimate and distinct ends of life that cannot be harmonized underpins his critique of the monist idea according to which there is only one harmonious ensemble of ends. By the same token, however, pluralism insists that the only principle by which political decisions and actions should be guided is the principle that compromises should, indeed

¹¹ Louise Marcil-Lacoste, “The Paradoxes of Pluralism,” chapter 6 in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (New York: Verso, 1992), p. 138.

must, be struck between conflicting values because none of them should be subordinated to one single uncriticizable or absolute value. As Berlin remarked, “How do we choose between possibilities? What and how much must we sacrifice to what? There is, it seems to me, no clear reply.”¹² Although Berlin criticizes Plato’s monist organization of social life for eliminating such questions altogether, and Fascism and Communism for trying to condition people to lose all interest in asking such questions, Berlin merely emphasizes that politics involves such questions insofar as it consists of “the problems of reconciling the variety of men and purposes, or blending them into some viable form of life worthy of human beings.”¹³ There is a “heuristic complicity,” to borrow Marcil-Lacoste’s words again, between Berlin’s critique of monism and the anxious evasion of explaining how to address the political problems pertaining to the necessity of living together with a frequently fanatical, unruly, and belligerent plurality.

The overfull-empty ambiguity also pervades Berlin’s writings on pluralism. On the one hand, pluralism suggests an irreducible abundance of life, experiences, ideals and values. Pluralism suggests that the world is a rich “garden of many flowers,” a “peaceful coat of many colors.”¹⁴ In a free liberal pluralist society, individuals are supposed to be able to choose among a variety of ends or goals and to develop their natural faculties in a variety of directions. Tolstoy, Montesquieu, Vico, and Herder, and great novelists, historians, and statesmen, are for Berlin the great apprehenders of the inexhaustible variety of persons, things, situations, cultures and societies that defy tidy classification by

¹² Berlin, *POI*, p. 14.

¹³ Berlin, *BGI*, p. 297. On Fascist and Communist tampering with individuals, see *PITC* and Berlin’s letter to Chimen Abramsky, June 13, 1969, *Building*, p. 394.

¹⁴ See Berlin, *EIPS*, n.p., *IWPJ*, p. 6, *IWNG*, p. 94 and *NPNPP*, 348.

the abstract and schematic vision of “theorists.”¹⁵ The world we inhabit exhibits “endlessly shifting, altering views, feelings, reactions, instincts, beliefs which constitute the uniqueness of each individual and of each of his acts and thoughts, and the uniqueness too, the individual flavor, the peculiar pattern of life, of a character, of an institution, a mood, and also of an artistic style, an entire culture, an age, a nation, a civilization.”¹⁶ In such a world, according to Berlin, the worst thing is to attempt to “vivisect”¹⁷ the protean living reality of human lives into a harmonious whole, or to force “the teeming multiplicity and variety of human activity into a Procrustean bed of symmetrical sets of moral rules which, precisely because they were rules, tended to represent differences as being relatively unimportant, and similarities as being alone relevant.”¹⁸

On the other hand, while Berlin speaks of respecting the teeming variety of reality—of ideals and ends, individuals and cultures—he says very little about the nature of the contrasting and conflicting relations and issues that make up this endlessly shifting and unruly reality. Berlin does not define his age as that of the end of ideological battles. On the contrary, he regards the twentieth-century as a battleground for various conflicting *isms*. But in the face of this reality he evokes the Anglo-French ideal of “a liberalism in which one is not overexcited by any solution, claimed finality, or any single answer.”¹⁹ “What seems very important to me these days,” Berlin said in defense of his liberalism, “is that we must understand that there is no such thing as one way to see the world, one

¹⁵ See Berlin, *Tolstoy*, pp. 39-40, *M*, p. 158 and *SR*.

¹⁶ Berlin, *SR*, p. 19.

¹⁷ See Berlin, *FIB*, p. 27 and his letter to Elena Levin, November 30, 1954, *Enlightening*, p. 454.

¹⁸ Berlin, *E*, p. 89.

¹⁹ Berlin, *HSR*, p. 18.

path for mankind.”²⁰ When asked if he was actually dispensing with ideology, Berlin admitted that he had no “bold vision” or “large ideas” to put forward that would “ignite other people,” only his belief in an untidy liberalism that asks everyone “to be satisfied with the maximum effort to preserve some kind of precarious equilibrium between varieties of goals and of men.”²¹ It is difficult to imagine that a writer could give more empty and imprecise imagery of the differences, contrasts, and collisions among goals and men, or state more plainly the postwar hope that the great conflict of ideologies could be replaced by pluralist trade-offs and compromises and a rough consensus on political issues (e.g. the desirability of minimal rights, a welfare state, political pluralism, etc.). This hope for a minimal liberal political consensus and pluralist bargaining, though presented as the only way to cope with a plurality of values, may be seen as an evasion of the task of facing up to the concrete reality of often armed and fanatical ideological political conflicts.²²

The fact-norm ambiguity is the most fundamental and has been the primary focus of Berlin’s philosophical interpreters whose preferred method of analysis is to clarify two distinct uses of the term pluralism—as an uncontroversial descriptive “fact” about the world and our moral experience, on the one hand, and as a highly controversial ethical “doctrine” or normative “theory,” on the other. Focusing on the status and implications of Berlin’s “theory” of value pluralism, Henry Hardy, George Crowder, Joshua Cherniss, Peter Lassman, Charles Larmore and Martha Nussbaum, among others, have

²⁰ Berlin, *HSR*, p. 19.

²¹ Berlin, *HSR*, pp. 21-22, 17. See also *POI*, pp. 14-16.

²² This is roughly John Dunn’s view of Berlin. See Dunn, “Our insecure tradition,” *TLS* (October 5, 1990), p. 1053.

reconstructed Berlin's theory into something resembling a clear and coherent philosophical doctrine about values and their implications for social and political theory.

For example, Hardy argues that the fact of pluralism refers to "the irreducible incommensurability of certain values," while the theory of pluralism refers to a prescriptive political theory "committed to encouraging the pursuit of a variety of values."²³ Lassman says that Berlin's value pluralism can be understood as an empirical fact about the world that refers to cultural diversity, and as a theory about the nature of value.²⁴ Larmore analyzes value pluralism as a controversial "doctrine about the multiple sources of value," a doctrine that offers an "ultimate explanation" for some instances of value conflict.²⁵ Following Larmore, Nussbaum describes Berlin's value pluralism as "a thesis about values and their objective status, and a thesis that is supposed to be true."²⁶ Cherniss likewise notes that pluralism can refer to a state of affairs and an ethical theory, and that the theory derives from and offers a particular interpretation of the factual reality of pluralism.²⁷

One response to these philosophical reconstructions has been to point out that Berlin did not write a systematic philosophical treatise on the subject of pluralism. Consequently, as Brian Barry warned, "constructing a Berlin 'doctrine' on any issue can be nothing but an excuse in selective quotation."²⁸ Considering that his remarks on pluralism (and much else of interest, such as liberalism and liberty) are scattered across a

²³ Henry Hardy, "Foreword" to *Dialogue*, p. 11n1.

²⁴ Peter Lassman, *Pluralism* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2011), p. 4.

²⁵ Charles Larmore, "Pluralism and Reasonable Disagreement," in *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 156-57.

²⁶ Martha Nussbaum, "Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39:1 (2011), p. 8.

²⁷ Joshua Cherniss's 2005 email to Beata Polanowska-Sygułska in *Dialogue*, p. 300.

²⁸ Brian Barry, "Isaiah, Israel and tribal realism," *TLS* (November 9, 2001), p. 7.

wide variety of essays, lectures, speeches, interviews, letters, prefaces, introductions, and manuscripts in various states of preparation and completeness, Jason Ferrell has recently suggested that it is a mistake to collect and interpret them “as if they were pieces to fit together into a programmatic statement...comparable to the work of theorists like John Rawls, Robert Nozick, or Ronald Dworkin.”²⁹

While these cautions against interpreting Berlin as a systematic political philosopher are welcome, the fact that he did not write like a typical political philosopher does not mean that he should not be taken seriously as one. Berlin’s scattered remarks on pluralism, though ambiguous, hang together and deserve to be reckoned with as a philosophically weighty doctrine about moral values. And yet the problem with the conventional practice of analytically redeeming Berlin’s ambiguous idea of pluralism by distinguishing the “fact” of pluralism from pluralism as a “theory” about the nature of moral value, is not that the discussions are analytical and philosophical, but that it is impossible to separate pluralism as a “fact” from pluralism as a “theory.”

Pluralism in Berlin’s writings is a philosophical doctrine or worldview, and like all philosophical doctrines it is “not concerned with specific facts, but with ways of looking at them.”³⁰ Value pluralism looks at the fact of the great individual, cultural, social, and political diversity of the world—which nobody denies—and, controversially, sees a fact about the structure of moral values: that the values and goals that guide human

²⁹ Jason Ferrell, “Isaiah Berlin as Essayist,” *Political Theory* 40:5 (October 2012), p. 603.

³⁰ Berlin, *PT*, p. 30. See also *PB*, p. 504: “I still am not really sure what a ‘*Weltanschauung*’ is supposed to be. I should have thought that the term usually meant general attitudes to life: such as optimism or pessimism; sensing purpose in all things, or the lack of it; monism or pluralism; what William James distinguished as ‘tough’ or ‘tender-’minded attitudes; and the like.” In conversation with Beata Polanowska-Sygulska, Berlin said: “Pluralism is a theory” (*Dialogue*, p. 210). Berlin also frequently refers to pluralism as a “conception” of men and society (see, e.g., *POI*, p. 9 and *MINC*, pp. 120-21) and a philosophical “doctrine” or “belief” about values (see, e.g., *AR*, pp. 79-80 and *VHH*, pp. 176-77).

behavior and which people are occasionally prepared to live and to die for are many and not all of them are compatible with each other. It is impossible to see pluralism as a fact about moral values without looking through the spectacles of a theory. That is to say, beyond the uncontroversial factual statement that humans exist and they are not all the same, the line between the “fact” and the “theory” of pluralism is not merely blurry; it does not exist. While all monists recognize differences among humans and societies, for example, they do not take this diversity as evidence demonstrating the “fact” of pluralism. Nor is the ordinary, inescapable experience of conflicting values or value spheres evidence demonstrating the “fact” of pluralism.

Since pluralism is a worldview that cannot be divided neatly into a fact on one side and a theory or doctrine on the other, we need to understand it in another way. I contend that the analytical redeemers have not appreciated the way in which Berlin struggles with the “fact” of pluralism in terms of both a theory of history and a theory of human nature, with the former ultimately taking second place to the latter.

Pluralism as the Legacy of Romanticism

That references to the “fact” of pluralism may be and often are easily and uncontroversially made today may be explained, on Berlin’s account, by the indelible imprint of romanticism on European consciousness. Though its roots may be traced back to antiquity, pluralism, as Berlin understands it, did not exist as a coherent idea or worldview before the eighteenth-century. Berlin identifies pluralism *socio-historically* as an ideology, attitude, vision or outlook that arose in the late eighteenth-century among the romantic writers, particularly the German romantics, to combat rationalist

Enlightenment thought, especially French thought, as well as classical Platonic ideals.³¹ Berlin identifies the socio-historical emergence of pluralism with reference to particular places (Germany and France), a period (1770-1820), and the social and political circumstances of its origin. The Romantics found a purchase for pluralism in the Kantian notion of individuals as the creator of moral values “as artists create works of art,” and in the related idea that there is no given structure of things, or pattern in nature or in the external world, to which individuals must adapt themselves because patterns are created and recreated by humans themselves who then impose them on nature or the external world.³² Thus Berlin defines the heart of romanticism as the doctrine “that morality is moulded by the will and that ends are created, not discovered.”³³ And the will is not thought of as limited or guided by conscience or reason or objective nature, but instead may operate outside or against “the objective framework of natural law which...prescribes the same immutable, universal goals to all men.”³⁴ This completely destroyed the notion that in morals and politics there are “objective criteria which operate between human beings, such that anyone who does not use these criteria is simply either a liar or a madman.”³⁵ Romanticism thus broke “the spell of unity”—i.e., the unitary European world—and in consequence the “acceptance of a plurality of independent, perhaps even incompatible, goals became a possible ideology.”³⁶ Berlin identifies the

³¹ See Berlin, *RR*, p. 146.

³² Berlin, *RR*, p. 119. See also pp. 87, 117, 119, 127, and *PT*, pp. 12-13. Berlin himself believes that moral and political attitudes are *more like* works of art *than* logical systems—but he resists the extreme romantic view that political attitudes are *exactly* like works of art. See his letter to Noel Annan, January 13, 1954, *Enlightening*, p. 422.

³³ Berlin, *ARW*, p. 237.

³⁴ Berlin, *TCE*, p. 16.

³⁵ Berlin, *RR*, p. 140. See also *IWPJ*, p. 12.

³⁶ Berlin, *Artistic*, p. 197. See also *EUV*, pp. 188-89.

“existentialist movement in France” as the “truest” representative of this ideology today, and he at times called himself a kind of existentialist.³⁷

As a socio-historical force that first appeared in the late eighteenth-century, pluralism was the head of “the great battering-ram which romanticism employ[ed] against the notion of order, against the notion of progress, against the notion of perfection, classical ideals, the structure of things.”³⁸ This image of pluralism as a battering-ram is worth emphasizing. By challenging the idea that there are universal, true, eternal answers to the central questions of how to live, the romantic battering-ram with pluralism at its head, Berlin explains, has enlarged “the field within which we now oscillate freely.”³⁹ But “we are still members of some kind of unified tradition.”⁴⁰ Indeed, as a pluralist Berlin always thinks of himself as operating within the great Western tradition, but as a battering-ram against the monist mould in which it casts morals and politics. And if not a full-fledged French existentialist, Berlin nevertheless considers himself a true heir of those German romantics who were “humane, generous, life-enhancing, openers of new doors.”⁴¹

And yet Berlin is genuinely torn and tormented by the legacy of romanticism in politics. While romanticism is responsible for breaking open the monist mould and making ideologies such as existentialism and pluralism possible, it is also responsible for untying the hands, so to speak, of the murderous rulers of the twentieth century (e.g.

³⁷ Berlin, *RR*, p. 139. On Berlin’s existentialism, see chapter 4 of this dissertation.

³⁸ Berlin, *RR*, p. 138. See also pp. 146-47.

³⁹ Berlin, *RR*, p. 141.

⁴⁰ Berlin, *RR*, p. 141.

⁴¹ Berlin, *ARW*, p. 236.

Hitler and Stalin) who flouted values universally shared (at least in the West).⁴² In the aftermath of the horrors of totalitarianism, Communism, and Fascism, Berlin is optimistic that some minimal objective standards or values can be restored, but he also harbors serious doubts about universal moral values or standards achieving a decisive victory over the disintegrating effects of pluralism since the moral pluralism of the romantics remains deeply embedded in “the European consciousness.”⁴³

Contemplating the destructive, disintegrating legacy of romanticism that culminated in totalitarianism and Fascism, Berlin draws two empirical lessons and one overarching moral one. The two empirical lessons are that not all human ends or goals are compatible, and that humans inevitably transform themselves in the process of seeking their goals, which in turn alters their future goals in unpredictable ways.⁴⁴ What we learn from history, in other words, is that because humans are unpredictably self-transforming beings who choose and create their ends, “We cannot fully predict the future, and we have to realize the necessity for choosing among incompatible ideals—and for living in a society in which different people may seek different, equally valid, ends.”⁴⁵

The overarching moral that Berlin draws from these historical lessons about human plurality is that as long as humans are human and live in societies, we have the capacity to understand them, and to the extent that we can understand them there must be something in common that allows us to bridge our differences.⁴⁶ Whatever it is that

⁴² See Berlin *EUV* and *SR*.

⁴³ Berlin, *TRR*, p. 190.

⁴⁴ See Berlin, *HSR*, pp. 16-17 and *POI*, p. 12. Berlin emphasizes the importance of drawing empirical as opposed to metaphysical lessons from the miseries of the twentieth century in his letter to Omar Haliq, April 17, 1972, *Building*, p. 488.

⁴⁵ Berlin, *HSR*, p. 17.

⁴⁶ Berlin, *RR*, p. 145.

humans have in common, Berlin argues, is a universal and empirical “fact about mankind.”⁴⁷ But whatever this dimension of commonality consists of, it must allow for the existence of objective moral differences among humans too, since these differences are also moral facts about mankind. In other words, if we give too much content to this as yet undefined thing that makes us human, we would invite charges of monism (since the idea of common humanity would then be so specific and substantial as to exclude some of the very plurality that we want to account for). If we give it too little content, we would invite charges of relativism (since the idea of common humanity would be a cipher admitting of any and all moral differences in such a way as to make moral judgments impossible). As a pluralist, Berlin seeks a middle ground between monism and relativism, and he finds this ground in his view of human nature. This should not be surprising given Berlin’s frequent claim that some conception of human nature is at the center of all political philosophies.⁴⁸

**Pluralism as Human Nature: Berlin’s Romantic Humanist view
of The Family of Mankind in the House of Human History**

Berlin’s answer to the question “What is it to be human?” is as ambiguous and complex as his discussion of pluralism. Sometimes he defines the human essence or human nature in terms of *basic liberty*, which is the psychological capacity to choose, a capacity that may be destroyed or tampered with by brainwashing and other forms of conditioning.⁴⁹ Sometimes he speaks of human nature in terms of the *basic needs* of all humans

⁴⁷ Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 37.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., *HLPM*, p. 455, *CWJM* and *JMOF*, p. 124.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., *Dialogue*, pp. 218-19, *FIB*, p. 202, and Berlin’s letter to Chimen Abramsky, June 13, 1969, *Building*, p. 394.

everywhere, such as food, shelter, warmth and security.⁵⁰ More often he speaks of the existence of universal agreement about certain *basic values* as a kind of minimal moral ground and necessary condition of social life.⁵¹ Just as often he speaks of a set of *basic or permanent concepts and categories*, such as right and wrong, good and bad, as a universal characteristic of “humanity” or “normal” human beings.⁵² Depending on which text of Berlin one reads, basic liberty, basic needs, basic values or basic categories (or all of the above) enter into the definition of what it means to be a normal human being.

It is tempting to conclude that Berlin defines basic human nature with reference to the four above-mentioned attributes of human beings since each attribute finds substantial support in Berlin’s essays. However, it not only makes a considerable difference to the nature of his pluralist outlook if one attribute rather than another constitutes his conception of human nature. It is also the case that of the four basic attributes (choice, needs, values, categories), the most basic, permanent, pervasive, general, deep, ultimate and difficult to observe, and in a sense encompassing all the other attributes, are the basic concepts and categories in terms of which humans everywhere think and communicate. These categories are so deeply ingrained in our minds that only the most profound philosophers and men of genius—Pascal, Dostoevsky, Proust, St. Augustine, Kant, Vico, Marx and Freud—have been able to reveal them.⁵³ For purposes of exposition I will refer to the basic concepts and categories that are constitutive of human nature as the “permanent categories.”

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Berlin, *FIB*, p. 184 and *CSH*, p. 2.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Berlin, *MINC*, p. 135, *POI*, p. 9, *RR*, p. 145, *Dialogue*, p. 100, *IWNG*, p. 96.

⁵² See, e.g., Berlin, *PT*, pp. 22-30, *Dialogue*, p. 173, *TPP*, pp. 30-32, *IPHP*, pp. 221-22, *HI*, pp. 32, 34, 56-57, 61, 75, 77, *SR*, p. 18.

⁵³ See Berlin, *CSH*, p. 24 and *SR*, pp. 17-18.

The permanent categories, Berlin tells us, include “such notions as society, freedom, sense of time and change, suffering, happiness, productivity, good and bad, right and wrong, choice, effort, truth, illusion,” etc.⁵⁴ The point, Berlin explains, is that “to think of someone as a human being is *ipso facto* to bring all these notions into play.”⁵⁵ As John Gray rightly notes, “It is these [permanent] categories, and not any substantive claims about human motivations or interests, that give most of the content to the idea of human nature in Berlin’s account of it.”⁵⁶ They function as the “minimum of common moral ground” that is “intrinsic to human communication.”⁵⁷ We could not understand “the modes of thought of the ancients or of any cultures remote from our own” unless we shared some of their “basic categories.”⁵⁸

The permanent categories constitute what Berlin calls the “common horizon”⁵⁹ or “human horizon.”⁶⁰ Just as Kant argued that we only know the external world insofar as it conforms to the most general categories of the human mind, i.e., the “frames of reference or systems of relations like space, time, number, causality, material thinghood,”⁶¹ so we only recognize humanity in terms of an analogous frame of reference that is presupposed

⁵⁴ Berlin, *PT*, p. 26. The list of permanent categories differs from text to text. In *Historical Inevitability* Berlin mentions “the notions of choice, of voluntary action, of responsibility, freedom” (*HI*, p. 75). In an essay on Vico they are: “Right and wrong, property and justice, equality and liberty, the relations of master and servant, authority and punishment” (*VHH*, p. 109). In conversation with Jahanbegloo Berlin mentions the universality of the notion of courage (*Conversations*, p. 37).

⁵⁵ Berlin, *PT*, p. 26.

⁵⁶ Gray, *Isaiah Berlin*, p. 14. When Beata Polanowska-Sygulska read this line to Berlin, his response was an unequivocal “That’s correct” (Berlin, *Dialogue*, p. 228). For an insightful discussion of the significance and function of permanent categories in Berlin’s argument against determinism, see Mark Bode, “Everything is What it is, and not Another Thing: Knowledge and Freedom in Isaiah Berlin’s Political Thought,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19:2 (2011), pp. 305-326.

⁵⁷ Berlin, “Introduction,” in *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 25.

⁵⁸ Berlin, *HI*, p. 61.

⁵⁹ Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 108. See also *POI*, p. 9: “[W]hat makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them.”

⁶⁰ Berlin, *POI*, p. 10.

⁶¹ Berlin, *PE*, p. 50. See also *TPP*, p. 31-32.

in everything we say everyday about human experience. Just as “space” without three (or more) dimensions cannot be space as we understand it, so a “human being” who does not think in terms of suffering and happiness, pleasure and pain, or good and bad cannot be a human as we define a human, and we define humans in this way because it is “intrinsic to the way in which we think, and (as a matter of ‘brute’ fact) evidently cannot but think.”⁶²

As Berlin explained in *Historical Inevitability*:

These categories permeate all that we think and feel so pervasively and universally, that to think them away, and conceive what and how we should be thinking, feeling, and talking without them, or in the framework of their opposites, is psychologically well-nigh impossible—as impracticable as, let us say, to pretend that we live in a world in which space, time, or number in the normal sense no longer exist.⁶³

The permanent categories make up the basic frame of reference that delimits and determines what we are able to recognize as the human essence of humanity—“our conscious idea of man...of what is human and what is not human or inhuman”—and more importantly make communication and understanding within and across societies possible.⁶⁴

The idea of a human horizon, which is meant to delimit humanness, must not be confused with Berlin’s more specific historical claim in “European Unity and Its Vicissitudes” that we in the West are working toward inhabiting but do not yet inhabit “one common moral world.”⁶⁵ The difference is clear in the case of the Nazis. Berlin always asserts that the Nazis are fully human however much we reject their way of life, but he also allows that we are right to be shocked by and to reject their way of life

⁶² Berlin, *PT*, p. 26. See also *IDW*, p. 126.

⁶³ Berlin, *HI*, p. 32.

⁶⁴ Berlin, *PT*, p. 23.

⁶⁵ Berlin, *EUV*, p. 206. See also p. 204.

because it violates our moral values. Berlin is clear in his 1991 interview with Nathan Gardels that he believes that “at the present, there don’t seem to be accepted minimum values that can keep the world straight. Let us hope, one day, that a large minimum of common values...will be accepted.”⁶⁶ In the meantime, we can recognize common humanity despite living in different moral worlds.

Berlin stresses that the permanent categories are not absolutely rigid and immutable; they are flexible and may change. The permanent categories “are things which we don’t question, which we take for granted...that there is a past and present, that time passes; the ideas of time, space, material objects, as in Kant.” Unlike ideas of time and space, however, with moral categories “like good and bad, wrong and right...there is a certain degree of flexibility;” they “are a little bit more elastic.”⁶⁷ But they are not “as relative or as fluid as some writers have too easily, in their reaction against the dogmatism of the classical objectivists, tended to assume.”⁶⁸ Exactly how flexible the permanent categories may be is an imprecise matter that would need to be investigated empirically “by moral psychology and historical and social anthropology.”⁶⁹ But generally speaking, our moral categories are less flexible than “taste” and “rules of etiquette,” and more flexible than “physical categories,” “orders and relations of sensible qualities” and “the uniformities on which the sciences are based.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Berlin, *IWNG*, p. 96.

⁶⁷ Berlin, *Dialogue*, p. 228. See also *HI*, p. 34: “our moral categories are, in the end, not much more flexible than our physical ones.” Their permanence and stability is what makes them objective. On this point see *HI*, pp. 56-57n1. Much more flexible than our moral categories are “customs, conventions, manners, taste, etiquette,” of which we expect wide differences (*EUV*, p. 205).

⁶⁸ Berlin, “Introduction,” p. 25.

⁶⁹ Berlin, “Introduction,” pp. 25-26.

⁷⁰ Berlin, *HI*, p. 56n1.

Berlin explains the flexibility of the permanent categories in terms of Wittgenstein's anti-Platonic notion of a "family resemblance" as the model of the relationship between the many instances of one concept.⁷¹ Following Vico, Berlin believes that the permanent categories have evolved from one culture or society to the next. Nevertheless, there is a kind of family resemblance among them "as in a row of portraits of the ancestors of modern society."⁷² Although there is not an essential or original or immutable human "core" or "kernel"⁷³ in each of these portraits (as a monist would argue⁷⁴), they are all equally recognizable members of the family of mankind. Different human cultures that now exist, once existed, or will exist, have enough of the permanent categories in common that they are recognizably and intelligibly human.

This is why Berlin rejects the view of human nature that he associates with Rousseau, a view that considers cultural differences as somehow not natural but "artificial," and assumes that if they were stripped away a basic natural or original man would remain. Like de Maistre, Berlin agrees with Edmund Burke that there is no such thing as "the natural man," i.e. a creature who embodies what is common and true of all men everywhere, at all times, and nothing besides this."⁷⁵ For Berlin our contingent features are as essential to our humanity as our permanent categories. What would have to be stripped away to recognize and appreciate our common humanity are not cultural

⁷¹ Just as the portraits of a family's ancestors differ but also resemble each other without there being a "central face" (*Dialogue*, p. 41) or "original family" (*VHH*, p. 109) of which they are variations or imperfect imitations, so the same is true of the portraits of the unique cultures that comprise the family of mankind. On the anti-Platonic, Nietzschean roots of Wittgenstein's notion of a "family resemblance," see Raymond Geuss, "Plato, Romanticism, and Thereafter," *Arion* 11:3 (2004), pp. 151-168.

⁷² Berlin, *VHH*, p. 109.

⁷³ Berlin, *VHH*, p. 111.

⁷⁴ See Berlin, *TCE*, p. 1.

⁷⁵ Berlin, *Conversations*, p. 74. See also *Dialogue*, p. 40.

differences but “stereotypes” that breed “irrational prejudice, hatreds, ghastly exterminations of heretics and those who are different” by substituting for “real knowledge” representations of others as “wicked or inferior, or absurd or despicable in some way.”⁷⁶

When Berlin considers the categories themselves, he thinks that they not only may be altered but also have been altered, and such alterations necessarily have a profound affect on our experiences. “[I]t is possible,” Berlin writes, “to conceive of beings whose fundamental categories of thought or perception radically differ from ours; the greater such differences, the harder it will be for us to communicate with them, or, if the process goes farther, to regard them as being human; or, if the process goes too far, to conceive of them at all.”⁷⁷ Berlin thinks that at the place and time of Hammurabi and the epic of Gilgamesh, for instance, human nature was somewhat different than it is now.⁷⁸ Consequently, we can’t understand them fully from the inside; they will inevitably seem somewhat opaque to us but still identifiably human and not insane. The time of Hammurabi notwithstanding, the permanent categories remain relatively constant elements of our thought or perception. The basic commonality among humans is permanent, or all but permanent, in the sense that it has endured since antiquity, and should continue to exist “as long as men are as they are.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Berlin, “Notes on Prejudice,” *The New York Review of Books* (October 18, 2001), p. 12.

⁷⁷ Berlin, *CSH*, p. 26.

⁷⁸ Berlin, *PT*, pp. 31-32.

⁷⁹ Berlin, *PT*, p. 31.

In sum, Berlin thinks of humanity as a large, diverse family that lives in the “house of human history.”⁸⁰ This house, Berlin says, has “many mansions”⁸¹—i.e., many incompatible cultures or societies. Machiavelli revealed two incompatible mansions, pagan and Christian, and there are more. Berlin argues that these mansions are not necessarily windowless or clouded by destructive stereotypes. The “windows of the mind (and soul),” Berlin believes, can be opened by the recognition of our common humanity and the knowledge that human differences are as deep as our similarities.⁸² “[I]f they [members of one culture] open their minds sufficiently,” Berlin writes in “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” “they can grasp how one might be a full human being, with whom one could communicate, and at the same time live in the light of values widely different from one’s own, but which nevertheless one can see to be values, ends of life, by the realization of which men could be fulfilled.”⁸³ It is possible for members of the family of mankind to recognize and comprehend each other insofar as they share permanent and quite stable categories in terms of which they think and act. The permanent categories define the human horizon which enables normal humans, past and present, whatever their differences, to constitute a common world, to communicate with each other and to understand each other as “human beings like ourselves,” albeit with different, incompatible and conflicting ideas about how to live.⁸⁴

How far the diverse members of this family may differ and still be considered sane or human is, for Berlin, a genuine philosophical, psychological, sociological, and

⁸⁰ Berlin, *AR*, p. 79.

⁸¹ Berlin, *AR*, p. 79.

⁸² Berlin, “Notes on Prejudice,” p. 12.

⁸³ Berlin, *POI*, p. 9.

⁸⁴ Berlin, *AR*, p. 83.

anthropological question to which there can be no precise answer. In any case, Berlin's evident sympathy toward the sentimental humanist "Family of Man" idea, popularized in 1955 by Edward Steichen's photographic exhibit of *The Family of Man*, is not meant to rule out a historical understanding of human nature, but rather to introduce the rule of commonness—we are all part of the family of mankind—across history. In this sense, pluralists are those who believe in the notion of the unity of mankind that is at the heart of the Western tradition, but do not believe that there is one true or virtuous way to live.

Motivated to avoid bloodshed and suffering in the wake of two World Wars, and to foster peace and decency, Berlin attacks those ideologies, especially Marxism, that sanction bloodshed by dividing people into incommensurable groups who cannot understand or communicate with each other, and who have no choice but to kill or be killed. He attacks such ideologies by way of his theory of pluralism, which aims to foster a wider recognition of our common humanity in the face of the destructive anti-humanist attitudes embedded in nationalist, totalitarian, communist and fascist ideologies of the twentieth century. Berlin takes the pluralist belief in the possibility of understanding, if not communicating with, others, to be the necessary condition for the possibility of a humanist politics of coexistence, toleration, and compromise.

To assert, as Berlin does, that the plurality of cultures, peoples, and religions into which mankind is divided is rooted in a basic human nature, certainly invites the same devastating criticisms that were leveled by Hilton Kramer, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and others against Steichen's *The Family of Man* exhibit, namely that the world seems immobile because the alibi or myth of the family of man based on a universal human

nature suppresses the weight of historically determined differences and injustices, denies the political differences of mankind, and evades conflict and conflictual politics.⁸⁵ Arendt would also point out that “if such a human nature were to exist, it would be a natural phenomenon, and to call behavior in accordance with it ‘human’ would assume that human and natural behavior are one and the same”—a major fallacy in her book.⁸⁶ For to introduce naturalness or kinship into human diversity, Arendt would argue, actually “forfeits” human plurality, which is founded on the absolute otherness and distinctness of every individual who, insofar as he or she is human, is a highly unnatural being.⁸⁷

Arendt’s Philosophy of Plurality

For Arendt, the human condition of plurality refers to the inescapable factual reality that men, not just one man, inhabit the earth. Arendt calls this fact a “miracle” because there is no reason why men in the plural should exist at all.⁸⁸ In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies “plurality,” along with “life” and “worldliness,” as “the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man.”⁸⁹ With respect to politics, she emphasizes, “while all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per*

⁸⁵ See Roland Barthes, “The Great Family of Man,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 100-102; Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), pp. 32-33; Hilton Kramer, “Exhibiting the Family of Man: ‘The World’s Most Talked About Photographs,’” *Commentary* 20 (October 1955), pp. 365-67. For an overview of the critical responses to the exhibition, see Monique Berlier, “The Family of Man: Readings of an Exhibition,” in *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography*, eds. Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 222-30.

⁸⁶ Arendt, *Lessing*, p. 12.

⁸⁷ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 94.

⁸⁸ Arendt, *PP*, p. 103.

⁸⁹ Arendt, *HC*, p. 7. Arendt distinguishes the human condition of life, worldliness, and plurality from “natality and mortality” which comprise “the most general condition of human existence” (*HC*, p. 8). The human condition comprehends these conditions plus everything humans create and come in contact with (*HC*, p. 9).

quam—of all political life.”⁹⁰ Plurality is particularly important for Arendt because it provides “the mutual guarantee, the common sense, men need in order to experience and live and know their way in a common world.”⁹¹ “Plurality rules the earth,” Arendt proclaimed in 1972, and this fact has far-reaching implications for both political theory and political practice.⁹²

In the ever-expanding scholarship on Arendt’s works, particularly on *The Human Condition*, a great deal of attention has been paid to the conditions of life and worldliness and their connection to politics and freedom, and even to the more basic human conditions of natality and mortality. The subject of “plurality” as the *conditio per quam* of politics, however, has been relatively neglected.⁹³ Readers looking for scholarly treatments of plurality in Arendt usually find that plurality has been reduced to a discussion of the condition of natality or difference or individuality as uniqueness.⁹⁴ This is un-Arendtian since political life as we know it is not based only on natality or unique individuals, but on being, living, and acting among others, on “plurality, diversity and mutual limitations...[on] men...of many countries and heirs to many pasts.”⁹⁵ “Difference” or “uniqueness” is an important aspect of plurality, which also refers to a

⁹⁰ Arendt, *HC*, p. 7.

⁹¹ Arendt, *IT*, p. 326. See also *NT*, p. 360.

⁹² Arendt, *Toronto*, p. 305.

⁹³ The theme of plurality in Arendt is examined in Margaret Betz Hull, *The Hidden Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Routledge, 2002) and Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁹⁴ For example, the entry for “plurality” in the index to Hanna Pitkin’s *Attack of the Blob* says “See individuality, as uniqueness.” Similarly, Peg Birmingham, in *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 72, argues that plurality, the essential condition of the political, “is the givenness of difference and that this difference has everything to do with natality.” Plurality and natality are closely related, to be sure, the one being virtually impossible to think without the other. Nevertheless, Arendt distinguishes between the two because while natality may be a *conditio sine qua non* of politics, only plurality is its sufficient cause or ultimate ground, its *conditio per quam*. But plurality is not the only condition of politics.

⁹⁵ Arendt, *Jaspers*, p. 81.

kind of “sameness” or “equality,” and which therefore should not be reduced to either difference or sameness alone. From the perspective of one person among many, plurality is like a group—a “We”—of people appearing, seeing, acting and speaking together; from the perspective of one person in isolation or solitude, plurality is like “the faceless ‘They’ from which the individual Self splits to be itself alone.”⁹⁶ Although it is of course true that many thinkers in the history of political thought attempted to deal with and theorize human plurality (e.g. Aristotle, Rousseau, Hobbes, Schmitt, Jaspers, Berlin, etc.), Arendt’s charge against them all, as Hans Sluga has rightly noted, is that they “have not properly taken this fact into account.”⁹⁷

Arendt’s understanding of the meaning of human plurality changed between the publication of *Origins* and *The Human Condition*. After *Origins*, Arendt argues that human plurality has its religious source in Genesis 1.27: “male and female created He *them*.”⁹⁸ This became Arendt’s motto for plurality. While she was writing *Origins* in the 1940s, however, she was under the influence of St. Augustine’s *City of God*, a book that favors the story of creation in Genesis 2.7 over Genesis 1.27.

From her correspondence with her dissertation advisor Karl Jaspers, we know that Arendt most likely encountered these two creation stories in Genesis through the work of St. Augustine. In February 1929 while completing her dissertation *Love and St. Augustine* (*Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*), Arendt wrote a short letter to Jaspers to explain her

⁹⁶ Arendt, *Willing*, p. 201.

⁹⁷ Hans Sluga, “The Pluralism of the Political: From Carl Schmitt to Hannah Arendt,” *Telos* 142 (Spring 2008), p. 93.

⁹⁸ Arendt, *TPT*, p. 61, emphasis in original. Arendt quotes from Genesis in *Socrates*, p. 39, *HC*, pp. 7-8 and *Toronto*, p. 313. As Arendt explained in her 1969 lectures on political philosophy, “Duality (like male and female created He them) is the philosophical way in which plurality is experienced” (*WIPP*, image 30, p. 024442, underlining in original).

delay: “I hope to be done with my work on St. Augustine by early April. I have been reading a number of relevant books I had not read before, the Genesis interpretation in particular. That has slowed me down more than I had anticipated.”⁹⁹ The “Genesis interpretation” is a reference to St. Augustine’s *Literal Meaning of Genesis (De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim)*.¹⁰⁰

In book VI of the *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine attempts to reconcile Genesis 2.7 with Genesis 1.27.¹⁰¹ Genesis 2.7 is the famous story of the creation of a man (*adam*) from the dust of the earth and then of a woman (*eve*) for him from his rib. Genesis 1.27 is the earlier creation story in which living creatures (animals, creeping things, etc.) and man himself, male and female, are made together on the sixth day of the original creation. Man and woman, in other words, were created both originally in one way and then later on in another way, and Augustine accounts for the two creations by distinguishing two orders of creation: creation in the order of causes and creation in the order of time. In the original order of causes, man and woman were created simultaneously and not in a visible form but invisibly, in their causes, during the germ or root of time as things yet to be. Later, in the order of time, they were formed separately each in their own due time in the visible form in which we now know them to be.

Even though she read Augustine’s *Literal Meaning of Genesis* in 1929, Arendt remained sensitive later in her life to the differences between these two creation stories.

⁹⁹ Letter to Jaspers, February 24, 1929, *HAKJ*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Arendt cites from books II, IV, V and VI of Augustine’s *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* in the second (and once in the third) part of her original dissertation written in German. Arendt, *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* (Berlin: Philo, 2003).

¹⁰¹ For my account of Augustine’s argument, I rely on St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Vol. 1, Books 1-6, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), pp. 177-196.

Arendt notes in *The Human Condition* that St. Augustine's *City of God* ignores Genesis 1.27 because Augustine prefers to emphasize that the human species was not created at once and in the plural like other creatures, but multiplied out of a One. That is, God created Man *unum ac singulum* [individual and alone] and *ex uno . . . multiplicavit genus humanum* [from one individual he increased the human race].¹⁰² While writing *Origins* (completed in 1949), as Roy Tsao has shown, Arendt emphasized the *City of God*'s interpretation of human plurality as the result of procreation from the one original man whom God created.¹⁰³ In the first edition of *Origins* Arendt described this as the view of the "Jewish-Christian tradition," in which a kind of equality is "expressed in the concept of one common origin beyond human history, human nature, and human purpose—the common origin in the mythical, unidentifiable Man who alone is God's creation."¹⁰⁴ In the original concluding chapter to *Origins*, Arendt spoke of the creation of "man" in the singular and "men" as inhabiting the earth thanks to human procreation, a view that is repeated in August 1950 at the beginning of her long entry in her *Denktagebuch* on politics: "Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man*, but *men* are a human, earthly product, the product of human nature."¹⁰⁵

Following the publication of *Origins*, however, Arendt's view of plurality changed. This change is evident in her post-1951 work in which she emphasizes, against the Jewish-Christian (i.e., Augustinian) tradition, not God's creation of one "man" but God's creation of *them*, male and female, as the Biblical recognition or source of human

¹⁰² See Arendt, *HC*, p. 8n1 and *Willing*, p. 121.

¹⁰³ See Tsao, "Arendt's Augustine," pp. 49-50.

¹⁰⁴ Arendt, *Burden*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁵ This entry has been translated into English and published in *IIP*, pp. 93-96.

plurality. In what follows I show that Arendt arrived at this non-Augustinian (and therefore non-traditional) conception of plurality in the course of her reflections on two questions after completing *Origins*: the question of the essence or nature of the totalitarian form of government *as* a form of government, and the question of the relationship between totalitarian rule and the great Western tradition of political philosophy. In the course of thinking about these questions, Arendt came to see more clearly that both totalitarianism and the great tradition were hostile to the existence of men in the plural, and this realization prompted her experiments in political philosophy based on the fact of plurality, experiments which she carried out from 1953 to 1963, before her life was consumed by the Eichmann trial.

Plurality as a Response to Totalitarian Terror

As Ben Berger has emphasized, Arendt's focus on plurality is a response to totalitarianism.¹⁰⁶ This is true, but the first impetus behind Arendt's understanding of plurality seems to come more precisely from her dissatisfaction with the way she had understood the absolute evil of the concentration camps—the sense in which the mass fabrication of corpses had not just destroyed human lives and our traditional religious and moral standards of judgment, but had in a more radical way deprived humans of their dignity and made them superfluous. Her initial understanding is found in her July 1948 *Partisan Review* essay, “The Concentration Campus,” which became, in a revised form, the last section, “III: Total Domination,” of chapter 12 of the 1951 edition of *Origins*.

¹⁰⁶ Ben Berger, “Out of Darkness, Light: Arendt's Cautionary and Constructive Political Theories,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 8:2 (2009), p. 159.

In the 1948 article, Arendt analyzes the process by which homeless, stateless and unwanted humans were prepared to be the “living corpses” of concentration camp society.¹⁰⁷ Briefly put, after both the juridical-political person and the moral person in man is destroyed, all that remains to be destroyed, which “still prevents men from being made into living corpses,” is the individual’s “unique identity.”¹⁰⁸ This is destroyed by reducing human beings to “specimens of the human beast,” so that “all react with perfect reliability even when going to their death,” like the behavior of Pavlov’s dog.¹⁰⁹ To transform humans into a reliable and predictable bundle of reactions, which do not have the ability to resist or to begin something new (Arendt), or do not have the inclination to choose (Berlin), is not merely morally inhuman, but is literally the transformation of human nature itself into something that is not human. “Totalitarianism,” Arendt explains, “strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous. Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity. Precisely because man’s resources are so great, he can be fully dominated only when he becomes a specimen of the animal-species man.”¹¹⁰ The aim of totalitarian domination is the transformation of mankind into an animal species.

However, after *Origins*, in her subsequent writings on totalitarianism, Arendt does not focus on the aim of destroying human nature. Rather, she introduces the idea that totalitarianism aims to destroy the human condition of plurality. And with this shift of

¹⁰⁷ Arendt, “Concentration Camps,” p. 751.

¹⁰⁸ Arendt, “Concentration Camps,” p. 757.

¹⁰⁹ Arendt, “Concentration Camps,” p. 759.

¹¹⁰ Arendt, “Concentration Camps,” p. 761.

focus or emphasis comes a new account of the nature and role of ideology in totalitarian domination. Evidence for these changes is found in Arendt's 1953 essay, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," which is generally considered to mark a career-reorienting turning-point: the birth of Arendt the political theorist.

"Ideology and Terror" was Arendt's contribution to a *Festschrift* for Karl Jaspers on the occasion of his 70th birthday in 1953, and published that same year in *The Review of Politics*.¹¹¹ It also replaced her original "Concluding Remarks" in subsequent, revised editions of *Origins*. Before its publication in 1953, Arendt had a critical exchange with Eric Voegelin over totalitarianism that began privately in March of 1951 and then appeared publicly in 1953 in the pages of *The Review of Politics*.¹¹² Soon after their debate, Voegelin claimed credit for forcing Arendt to rethink the role of ideology in totalitarianism. "The good lady who was the subject of my critique," Voegelin wrote to Marshall McLuhan on July 17, 1953, "was so disturbed by it, that she wrote a whole article ["Ideology and Terror"] clarifying her point after a fashion in a more recent issue of the same periodical."¹¹³

¹¹¹ Arendt, *IT*. A German version of the essay was published in *Offener Horizont: Festschrift für Karl Jaspers*, ed. Klaus Piper (Munich: Piper, 1953), pp. 229-54. On March 23, 1953, Arendt delivered a lecture on the American radio station in West Germany, RIAS Radio University, that is published under the title "Mankind and Terror." That essay rehashes parts of her earlier "Concentration Camps" essay and does not reflect her thinking in "Ideology and Terror." I suspect that Arendt believed, for purposes of anti-totalitarian propaganda, that her earlier discussion of totalitarian terror was more appropriate for the radio's audience.

¹¹² For more details about their debate see Peter Baehr, "Debating Totalitarianism: An Exchange of Letters Between Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin," *History and Theory* 51 (October 2012), pp. 364-380. For lengthier assessments see Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, "The Revival of Religion: a Device against Totalitarianism? A Philosophical Debate between Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt," *Voegelian* Occasional Paper No. 88 (December 2011), pp. 1-33 and Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), pp. 130-160.

¹¹³ Quoted in Baehr, "Debating Totalitarianism," p. 368.

Peter Baehr contends that Voegelin could not have influenced Arendt in this way because the origins of Arendt’s “Ideology and Terror” essay go back to a lecture Arendt gave in November 1950 at the University of Notre Dame, well before she was criticized by Voegelin in his letter of March 16, 1951. This information, however, is incorrect. Baehr relies on Young-Bruehl, who erroneously states in her biography of Arendt that “Ideology and Terror” was first prepared as a lecture to be delivered at Notre Dame in November of 1950.¹¹⁴ Arendt’s lecture at Notre Dame, as the text in her online archives indicates, was titled “Ideology and Propaganda” and reprises her claims in *Origins* about the structure of totalitarian regimes and total domination.¹¹⁵ Arendt’s 1950 Notre Dame lecture is not the germ of her 1953 essay. Voegelin, then, could have prompted Arendt to rethink the role of ideology in totalitarianism, and if we are looking to explain the evolution of Arendt’s thought from *Origins* to “Ideology and Terror” in terms of Arendt’s interlocutors, Arendt’s critical exchange with Voegelin is important.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 251

¹¹⁵ The text of the “Ideology and Propaganda” lecture is available online at the Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress website.

¹¹⁶ But there is another writer, a poet rather than a philosopher, who might have had some influence on Arendt around the same time and in the same direction: Czeslaw Milosz. It is possible, though admittedly highly speculative, that certain shifts in Arendt’s thinking marked by her 1953 essay are the result of her meeting with Milosz in Paris in 1952 and her reading of his *Captive Mind*. Before her own essay on ideology and terror was published she read and reviewed (or at least blurbed) Milosz’s book:

The Captive Mind is in a class by itself . . . without in the least belonging to the still increasing confession literature of former Communists. . . . Brilliantly, movingly and with a wealth of psychological detail, it lays before us the whole arsenal of reasons and motives with which men can argue themselves into submission and conformity. The inner drama of a whole generation unfolds itself in the reports this Polish poet gives of the battle which he gave himself in order to win freedom with security. Because he is a poet, he still had to explain it all to himself, reliving his experience, and thus explaining to us what is happening in the darkest part of a dark world—the human mind. (Arendt’s blurb of *The Captive Mind* for Knopf as it appears in an advertisement in the *New Republic*, June 22, 1953, p. 23, ellipses in original.)

In any case, Arendt revisits the question of the essence of total domination in “Ideology and Terror.” Ursula Ludz is right to insist that “Ideology and Terror” does not belong with the more history-driven style of analysis of *Origins* but is a “philosophical essay”¹¹⁷ that poses and examines the question whether totalitarian government “has its own essence and can be compared with and defined like other forms of government such as Western thought has known and recognized since the times of ancient philosophy.”¹¹⁸ This question leads Arendt to consider several issues: why questions of this sort have been out of fashion; how political philosophy has defined the essence of governments, their source of motion, and criterion for judging the behavior of citizens; the concept and place of law in totalitarian government; terror as the essence of totalitarian domination; the logicity of ideological thinking as the guide to action in totalitarian governments; and whether there is a basic experience of living together that provides the foundation for totalitarian governments.

Arendt’s remarks on the aim of totalitarian terror are significant because, *pace* Young-Bruehl, it is no longer the natality-destroying, animal-species creating transformation of human nature that reflects “the deepest level of Arendt’s vision”¹¹⁹ and characterization of totalitarian terror. In 1953 Arendt begins to use the metaphor of an

From Arendt this is high praise indeed. Karl Jaspers wrote a forward to *The Captive Mind*, which Arendt received in April or May 1953 and translated into English, but which was not included in Knopf’s English editions, only in the German and French editions. Jaspers also wrote in English a short review of *The Captive Mind* for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, “Endurance and Miracle,” June 6, 1953, pp. 13, 30. While *The Captive Mind* was not published until 1953, the first chapter, “Murti-Bing,” was published in the Sept.-Oct. 1951 issue of the *Partisan Review*, not long after Arendt’s *Origins* was in bookstores. Milosz, “Murti-Bing,” trans. Jane Zielonko, *Partisan Review* 18:5 (Sept.-Oct. 1951), pp. 540-556.

¹¹⁷ Ursula Ludz, “A Response to Margaret Canovan,” *Hannah Arendt Newsletter* (Dec. 1999), pp. 24-25.

¹¹⁸ Arendt, *IT*, p. 304. The names of some of the philosophers that Arendt reported to Jaspers that she had been reading since finishing *Origins*—Plato, Cicero, Marx and Hegel—appear in this article, along with Montesquieu, Engels, Epictetus, Nietzsche, Augustine, Lenin and Luther.

¹¹⁹ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 253.

“iron band” to describe the rule of terror, and she does so in order to emphasize that where terror rules human plurality is obliterated. She characterizes totalitarian terror as the plurality-destroying pressing of men against each other to produce “One Man of gigantic dimensions.”¹²⁰ Lest anyone every start thinking or willing something against the movement of History or Nature, Arendt points out that terror aims to destroy “the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men” as well.¹²¹ The space between men that is required for individuals to appear to one another as plural individuals must be destroyed both figuratively and literally by pressing them together so tightly that they lose “contact with their fellow men as well as [with] the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought.”¹²²

Terror, in other words, does not just aim to destroy individual spontaneity and uniqueness leaving behind pale imitations of human beings; it also aims to fabricate out of these beings One Man that can be mobilized to accelerate the movement of History or Nature.¹²³ Instead of thinking and acting, men pressed together into One Man are coerced and moved entirely by the strict logicity of totalitarian ideology that functions perfectly in the absence of plurality. This gigantic man who cannot act in concert, think in solitude, or experience the reality of the common world is not a man among men but One Man, all alone, with not even the slimmest of chances “that loneliness may be transformed into

¹²⁰ Arendt, *IT*, p. 312.

¹²¹ Arendt, *IT*, p. 312.

¹²² Arendt, *IT*, p. 327.

¹²³ Arendt, *IT*, pp. 312-314.

solitude and logic into thought.”¹²⁴ It is the total impotence of this One Man, the inverse of the omnipotence of God, which makes humans as humans superfluous under conditions of total terror. The experience of the iron band of terror is thus the total negation of the human condition of plurality.

Plurality as a Response to Our Philosophical Tradition

If the first impetus for Arendt’s concept of plurality comes from her rethinking the ghastly results of totalitarian terror, the second impetus comes from her rethinking at the same time our philosophical tradition’s “innocence” in relation to totalitarian terror. As early as November of 1950 Arendt began privately to associate the Western tradition’s concern with “Man” rather than “Men” with totalitarianism. As she wrote in her *Denktagebuch*: “If Man is the topic of philosophy and Men the subject of politics, then totalitarianism signifies a victory of ‘philosophy’ over politics—and not the other way around. It is as though the final victory of philosophy would mean the final extermination of the philosophers. Perhaps, they have become ‘superfluous’.”¹²⁵ In April of 1951, she put this thought in different words in her longer, unsent letter to Voegelin:

I suspect that...there is something wrong with our philosophical tradition. I don’t know what it is, but it seems to me to be connected with the plurality of human beings and with the fact that philosophy has been principally concerned with *the* human being. To put it another way, if it is true that the quintessence of totalitarianism can be summed up in the sentence: The omnipotence of *man* makes *men* superfluous...then totalitarianism’s power to destroy humans and the world lies not only in the delusion that everything is possible, but also in the delusion that there is such a thing as *man*.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Arendt, *IT*, p. 327.

¹²⁵ Arendt, *DI*, November 1950, p. 43.

¹²⁶ Letter to Voegelin, quoted in Baehr, “Debating Totalitarianism,” p. 376.

In a letter to Jaspers in March of 1951, Arendt revealed where this train of thought was heading:

[Even though I] took such trouble [in *Origins*] to isolate the elements of totalitarian governments...to show that the Western tradition from Plato up to and including Nietzsche is above any such suspicion...[philosophy is not altogether innocent] in the sense that Western philosophy has never had a clear concept of what constitutes the political, and couldn't have one, because, by necessity, it spoke of man the individual and dealt with the fact of plurality tangentially.¹²⁷

Here Arendt distinguishes between the question of totalitarian elements of the Western tradition, and the question of the Western tradition's philosophical approach to politics.

By 1951 Arendt had already taken up the first question, having recognized that there was a "serious gap in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*," namely "the lack of an adequate historical and conceptual analysis of the ideological background of Bolshevism," that is, the Russian form of totalitarianism connected with Marx and Marxism.¹²⁸ Employing Goethe's description of a big city built upon a network of subterranean roads, cellars and sewers,¹²⁹ Arendt compares "the traditional social and political framework of Europe" to a big city, saying that in *Origins* she focused on the network of subterranean roads underneath the city which suddenly emerged when the city—the traditional framework of thought—broke down. The subterranean roads appeared and crystallized into totalitarian movements and governments. This focus was

¹²⁷ Letter to Jaspers, March 4, 1951, *HAKJ*, p. 166.

¹²⁸ Arendt's 1952 Guggenheim application quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 276. On Marx and Bolshevism, see Arendt, *KMPT*, p. 276.

¹²⁹ Arendt, *TPT*, p. 41, quoting Goethe in 1781: "Like a big city, our moral and political world is undermined with subterranean roads, cellars, and sewers, about whose connection and dwelling conditions nobody seems to reflect or think; but those who know something of this will find it much more understandable if here or there, now or then, the earth crumbles away, smoke rises out of a crack, and strange voices are heard." Arendt read and admired Goethe, but she probably encountered this quotation in Walter Benjamin's 1928 essay on Goethe, translated by R. Livingstone and published under the title "Goethe: The Reluctant Bourgeois" in the *New Left Review* 133 (May-June 1982), pp. 69-93.

necessary, Arendt claims, to highlight “the shocking originality of totalitarianism,” but it came at the price of ignoring the totalitarian currents and elements that may have been in the traditional framework itself, especially in Marxism. Hence Arendt’s next book project, for which she won a Guggenheim grant in 1952, to investigate the totalitarian elements of Marxism, which would require nothing less than a “critical discussion...of the chief tenets of Western political philosophy.”¹³⁰ As Arendt put it the following year, “Whoever touches Marx touches the tradition of Western thought.”¹³¹

The Marxism book morphed into the study of the Western tradition of political thought and was never completed in its proposed form. The work that Arendt put into it resulted in several seminars, lectures, essays and radio broadcasts, many of which have only recently been published. In other words, around 1953-54 Arendt effectively abandoned her plans to write a book on the totalitarian elements of Marxism and began to focus instead on the distinct but related question of the Western tradition’s philosophical approach to politics, with an eye toward its treatment of plurality.

Arendt’s Experimental Political Philosophy

In January 1953, Arendt wrote in her notebook directions for political scientists labeled “experimental”:

To establish a science of politics one needs first to reconsider all philosophical statements on Man under the assumption that men, and not Man, inhabit the earth. The establishment of political science demands a philosophy for which men exist only in the plural. Its field is human plurality. Its religious source is the second creation-myth – not Adam and rib, but: Male and female created he them. In this realm of plurality which

¹³⁰ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 276. For details about Arendt’s Marx project, see Lisa Tama Weisman, *Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx: On Totalitarianism and the Tradition of Western Political Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

¹³¹ Arendt, *KMPT*, pp. 276-77.

is the political realm, one has to ask all the old questions – what is love, what is friendship, what is solitude, what is acting, thinking, etc., but not the one question of philosophy: Who is Man, nor the *Was kann ich wissen, was darf ich hoffen, was soll ich tun?* [What can I know? What shall I do? What may I hope?] ¹³²

Although Arendt addresses this task to political scientists, it is Western philosophy's traditional approach to politics that is at issue. She clearly has Kant's philosophy in mind, as she rejects his three central philosophical questions as having little or nothing to do with the condition of plurality. Indeed, in her Kant lectures, Arendt points out that Kant's only question that even implies plurality, What shall I do?, "concerns the conduct of the self in its independence of others—the same self that wants to know what is knowable for human beings and what remains unknowable but is still thinkable, the same self that wants to know what it may reasonably hope for in matters of immortality....The notion underlying all three questions is self-interest, not interest in the world."¹³³ If philosophers were ever to take interest in the world, Arendt writes in the conclusion of her "Philosophy and Politics" (1954) essay, "they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs—in its grandeur and misery—the object of their *thaumadzein*. Biblically speaking, they would have to accept—as they accept in speechless wonder the miracle of the universe, of man and of being—the miracle that God did not create Man, but 'male and female created He them.'"¹³⁴ And at the 1954

¹³² Arendt, *DI*, January 1953, p. 295, italics and underlining in original. Here Arendt is perhaps also distancing herself from Karl Jaspers, who argues in his essay "On My Philosophy" that the four questions formulated by Kant "are still ours" albeit "in changed form." According to Jaspers, there are not four but five fundamental Kantian questions for our age: What can we know in the sciences? How shall we realize the most profound communication? How can truth become accessible to us? What is man? What is Transcendence (Diety)? See Jaspers, "On My Philosophy," trans. Felix Kaufmann, in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Meridian, 1989), pp. 166-82.

¹³³ Arendt, *LKPP*, pp. 19-20.

¹³⁴ Arendt, *PP*, p. 103.

American Political Science Association meeting, Arendt delivered a lecture on the “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought,” in which she argues for a “new science of politics”—not in the sense of a restoration of political science in a Platonic spirit, as Voegelin sets out in his *New Science of Politics*, but in the sense of “an original act of *thaumadzein* whose wondering and hence questioning impulse must now (i.e., contrary to the teaching of the ancients), directly grasp the realm of human affairs and human deeds.”¹³⁵

What an experimental political science based on a philosophy of pluralism looks like is shown in Arendt’s lectures, essays, and books that address certain “What is...?” questions: What is freedom? What is authority? What is power? What is violence? What is politics? What is action? What is thinking? What is judgment? The point of asking these old questions is not to “prescribe any particular political action,” but to “comprehend politics as one of the great human realms of life as against all former philosophies.”¹³⁶ And the concepts that Arendt articulates, as Patchen Markell explains, are meant to help us understand “features of [our] own experience that might otherwise have eluded [us].”¹³⁷

In her critical exercises in thinking, Arendt explains the price that plural, earthbound human beings must pay in order to live politically under the conditions that their life on earth has been given to them. Consider, for example, Arendt’s pluralist

¹³⁵ Arendt, *CP*, pp. 430, 444, 445.

¹³⁶ Arendt, *Jaspers*, pp. 90-91.

¹³⁷ Patchen Markell, “The Experience of Action,” in *Thinking in Dark Times*, p. 102. Of course this is not a new insight into Arendt. For a similar discussion of the role of concepts in Arendt, See Bhikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), p. 11.

conceptualization of power: “power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert.”¹³⁸ This is not a traditional understanding of power. As Arendt explains in *On Violence*, political scientists and political theorists, both on the Left and on the Right, equate violence with power. They conceptualize violence as an extension of power, as a form of power, as the ultimate expression of power. They all agree with Mao Tse-tung that “Power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”¹³⁹ They all believe that power means dominating others, getting them to do what you want them to do, and that violence is an effective means of exerting power over others.

The problem with this traditional equation of violence with power, Arendt explains, is that it is actually dangerous and self-defeating to believe that power, when challenged from without or disintegrating from within, can be maintained and defended with coercive, violent means, the means of “One against All.”¹⁴⁰ “To substitute violence for power can bring victory,” Arendt writes, “but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power.”¹⁴¹ As plural creatures, in other words, the very need to have recourse to violence means that the power structure between people has broken down.

Consider Arendt’s theory of freedom. For Arendt, the freedom of non-autonomous, because plural, earthbound creatures, like power, is experienced in action with others, and is not a property of the will nor experienced in solitude in intercourse with one’s self. The price to be paid for freedom, Arendt writes, is “man’s inability to

¹³⁸ Arendt, *OV*, p. 52.

¹³⁹ Arendt, *OV*, pp. 11, 37.

¹⁴⁰ Arendt, *OV*, p. 42.

¹⁴¹ Arendt, *OV*, p. 53.

rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing).”¹⁴² Freedom in this sense is political, and in order to experience it “sovereignty...must [be] renounce[d].”¹⁴³ Or rather, if a person, group, or body politic wishes to be sovereign, this “can be purchased only at the price of the freedom, i.e. the sovereignty, of all others.”¹⁴⁴ It is actually dangerous and self-defeating to believe that one can be free only if one is sovereign. Connecting the danger of sovereignty with the danger of violence, Arendt writes that “the famous sovereignty of political bodies has always been an illusion, which, moreover, can be maintained only by the instruments of violence, that is, with essentially nonpolitical means.”¹⁴⁵ In Arendt’s new logic, the price human beings pay to act, which always occurs among and in relation to others, is “the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future.”¹⁴⁶ The purpose of Arendt’s experimental political philosophy is not to tell us what is to be done, but to help us fully appreciate and understand the price that we must be resolved to pay in order to live together politically.

Conclusion

In recognizing the existence of a plurality of ultimate ends, each fully human, rational and valid, Berlin’s theory of pluralism holds out hope for seeing “human beings like ourselves” in almost every human being, which he believes may lead to greater respect and toleration of others. Pluralism is supposed to do this not by denying the inevitability of conflicts of ultimate and incompatible values, but by presenting the inevitability of

¹⁴² Arendt, *HC*, p. 244.

¹⁴³ Arendt, *WF*, p. 165.

¹⁴⁴ Arendt, *WF*, p. 164.

¹⁴⁵ Arendt, *WF*, p. 164.

¹⁴⁶ Arendt, *HC*, p. 244.

such conflict in a way that promotes living with and understanding other ways of life—tolerating different ways of living instead of justifying their persecution or elimination in the name of a more perfect and harmonious future. Although he is attuned to the possible nihilistic and relativistic excesses of pluralism, he believes that his theory of pluralism is nonetheless a much needed response to the contemporary collapse of humanism’s central pillar, the assumption of common humanity or family of man—a collapse which is both a cause and symptom of the rise of an attitude that condones the sacrifice and slaughter of “many millions...as not quite human” in the name of ideological abstractions such as history or humanity or progress.¹⁴⁷

Arendt, by contrast, develops her philosophy of human plurality in response to the totalitarian experiment in creating One Man out of many, and in response to the Western tradition’s concern with *man*. Against both totalitarianism and the philosophical tradition’s deeply hostile attitude toward the problems posed by human plurality, Arendt wants political philosophers and political scientists to take up the attitude of gratitude and wonder toward plurality. Arendt is dubious of Berlin’s optimistic humanist belief that the more we see humanity in other human beings the more we are inclined to recognize their equality and dignity rather than resent their (minor) differences and believe in their superfluity. Human plurality for Arendt cannot be defended on the basis of humanism which claims that others are human beings like ourselves, for the more we know about one another the more we “recoil from the ideal of humanity.”¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, Arendt’s concept of plurality is designed not to emphasize our basic commonality as a basis for

¹⁴⁷ Berlin, *EUV*, p. 180.

¹⁴⁸ Arendt, *OT*, p. 235.

communication and toleration, but to emphasize that it is because we exist in the plural that we should be grateful for the presence of other people who constitute human relationships and affairs, who guarantee common sense and the reality of the world for each of us. Furthermore, it is because we exist in the plural that we should be grateful for the presence of other people who relieve us of loneliness, and who, more importantly, as potential co-creators of a common world, constitute the realm of politics and freedom and make speech and action, forgiving and promising, and the establishment of political organizations and citizenship rights possible.

CHAPTER 4

A World Unhinged

The focus of this chapter is primarily on the two major works that Arendt and Berlin both published in 1958, Arendt's *The Human Condition* and Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty." I situate and interpret both works in the context of the postwar fear that the modern world has become unhinged from its past, deprived of stability and thrown into disorder. According to Arendt, one of the main symptoms of the unhinging of the world was the popular belief in the 1950s that "man" was in crisis and needed to be changed. In the face of a disordered world, bereft of the banisters of the tradition, the tendency was to retreat from the world into the self and to focus on adjusting the behavior of individuals rather than making adjustments to the world between them. To counteract this tendency, Arendt's strategy in *The Human Condition* is not to construct a vision of *man* as a laboring, working, and acting being but to introduce us to the elementary articulations of the human world through these fundamental activities that escape more and more of us.

Berlin's account of the zeitgeist of social adjustment in the early 1950s is much lengthier than Arendt's, highlighting the disastrous political implications of what he called "agoraphobia"—fear of the disordered freedom of the world beyond the walls of one's tidy and orderly private life. I argue that Berlin's famous concern in "Two Concepts of Liberty" with protecting a minimum area in private life for free action is meant to counter, and not exacerbate, the flight from the world and politics. Berlin

defends negative political liberty in order to protect not just man's status as a free being, but the freedom of the artist, *engagé* rebel or existentialist.

Arendt and the "Crisis of Man"

As the literary scholar Mark Greif argues in *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973*, Hannah Arendt was a master of the discourse of the crisis of "man" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and later on in *The Human Condition*. I ultimately wish to challenge Greif's view as a one-eyed reading of Arendt in which the whole crisis of the "world" is neglected, but it is important to recognize that there is much evidence for the one-eye reading.

As Greif argues, there was a general conviction among a wide variety of intellectuals in America that, in the face of violations of the "rights of man" leading up to the Nazi movement and the Second World War, the crisis of the century was a crisis of "man."¹ And "the one true masterpiece and culminating work...concerned with man himself" was Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*.² Her "practical critique of the pretensions of the rights of man" as well as her appeal to "the necessity for their new or renewed basis" show her a "master of the discourse of man."³

On Greif's account this discourse is nearly exclusively present in Arendt's original "Preface" and "Concluding Remarks" to *Origins* in which she seems to be most horrified by the totalitarian assault on human nature. As Arendt announced in the Preface, wherever totalitarianism has ruled "it has begun to destroy the essence of man," and its

¹ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 3.

² Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p. 90.

³ Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p. 90.

victory, though unlikely, would “coincide with the destruction of humanity.”⁴ Even though the war was over, Arendt concluded her book by saying that “Human nature as such is at stake”⁵—notice “the present tense” Greif remarks.⁶ Indeed, the specter that haunted Arendt, as Richard J. Bernstein put it, was not so much of the total domination or oppression of human beings, but of humanity as such being “obliterated.”⁷ A better title for *Origins*, Greif suggests, would have been *The Origins of Why Modern Men Would Want to Change Human Nature, and How the Worst of Them Have Tried, with Hints on What to Do Now*.⁸

Not just Greif but readers in the early 1950s, I would add, seized on Arendt’s claim in *Origins* that “human nature as such is at stake” as evidence either of her genius or of her ignorance. Alice Sheldon wrote an admiring letter to Arendt endorsing that line as “so tru[e],” adding: “I wonder if ever another age faced such a capacity for self-destruction.”⁹ To the philosopher Eric Voegelin, by contrast, Arendt’s claim about human nature was unbelievably incoherent:

When I read this sentence, I could hardly believe my eyes. “Nature” is a philosophical concept; it denotes that which identifies a thing as a thing of this kind and not of another one. A “nature” cannot be changed or transformed; a “change of nature” is a contradiction of terms; tampering with the “nature” of a thing means destroying the thing. To conceive the

⁴ Arendt, *Burden*, p. viii.

⁵ Arendt, *Burden*, p. 433.

⁶ Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p. 91.

⁷ Richard J. Bernstein, “Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?: From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil,” chapter 6 in *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, eds. Larry May and Jerome Kohn (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 138.

⁸ Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p. 91.

⁹ Alice Sheldon’s letter to Arendt, no date, image 19, p. 009632. General, 1938-1976, n.d.—“Se-Si” miscellaneous—1953-1975, n.d. (Series: Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d.). Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

idea of “changing the nature” of man (or of anything) is a symptom of the intellectual breakdown of Western civilization.¹⁰

Arendt’s reply to Voegelin was published in the same issue of the *Review of Politics*. Leaving aside the complicated philosophical and theological question of “the relationship between essence and existence in Occidental thought,” Arendt explained to Voegelin that by describing “the success of totalitarianism” in terms of a “radical liquidation of freedom as a political and as a human reality,” she was affirming human freedom as belonging “to man’s essential capabilities”—a capability that man was in danger of losing under totalitarianism, whether or not it is conceived of as part of our “nature.”¹¹ As Arendt wrote in her longer unpublished letter to Voegelin and also later in *The Human Condition*, if human nature exists it exists only as God’s creation, and we can know it only “insofar as it has existence.”¹² The point is that man’s essential capabilities as we know them exist and can be destroyed under totalitarian conditions. “[N]o realm of eternal essences will ever console us if man loses his essential capabilities,” Arendt wrote.¹³ In writing these words, as Jeffrey Isaac explained, Arendt “clearly wants to maintain, against those for whom nothing meaningful can be said about the boundary conditions governing human conduct, that human existence does have distinguishing, limiting features. Yet she just as clearly wants to avoid the kind of essentialism epitomized by Voegelin, for whom such limiting features are unchanging and unambiguous.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Eric Voegelin, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” *Review of Politics* 15:1 (January 1953), pp. 74-75.

¹¹ Arendt, *Reply*, p. 408.

¹² Arendt, *Reply*, p. 408 and *HC*, pp. 10-11.

¹³ Arendt, *Reply*, p. 408.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 108.

We find Arendt concerned with threats to man's essential capabilities in *The Human Condition* too. In that book, in Greif's words, it seems that "Arendt had come to look around her, in the United States and Western Europe and the modern postwar world, to see a change in human nature that *did not* depend on totalitarian society per se. Rather, it had reached all 'societies' as such—and might be rooted in America and the West."¹⁵ As with *Origins*, the main evidence of the discourse of man in *The Human Condition* is found in the last chapter of the book, "The Victory of the *Animal Laborans*."

Thinking about what we are "doing" in our late-modern postwar capitalist world, Arendt suggests in the last chapter of *The Human Condition* that aside from scientists and a "privileged few"¹⁶ who are still able to think and act, the rest of us are not "doing" anything compared to the human experiences of the past. Our experience of thinking has become a "reckoning with consequences," a mechanical function of the brain that can be performed better by computers and other "electronic instruments."¹⁷ We experience action only "in terms of making and fabricating," which we do not experience as such but mainly as "another form of laboring," which is not really what we are doing either.¹⁸ Not labor but "a sheer automatic functioning" is what society demands of everybody in our "society of jobholders."¹⁹ As Arendt explains, it is "as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed,

¹⁵ Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, p. 257.

¹⁶ Arendt, *HC*, p. 324.

¹⁷ Arendt, *HC*, p. 322.

¹⁸ Arendt, *HC*, p. 322.

¹⁹ Arendt, *HC*, p. 322.

‘tranquilized,’ functional type of behavior.”²⁰ Arendt thus sees in our modern world “serious danger signs that man may be willing and, indeed, is on the point of developing into that animal species from which, since Darwin, he imagines he has come.”²¹ Arendt, on this reading, is haunted by the specter of Marx’s “socialized mankind” comprised of “worldless specimens of the species mankind.”²²

In other words, it is as though we all decided that the promotion of the organic life process is the highest good and is to be managed by scientists and the natural sciences, and that we all agreed to see our human world transformed into a life-sustaining natural world in which there is no place for the activities of labor, work, and action. In consequence, we have blurred the ontological distinction between human and animal life, if it retains any meaning at all. The only thing “needed” and “necessitated” in such a world is “life’s metabolism with nature;” everything else, including the humanity of man, is “superfluous.”²³

Furthermore, since we are able in the modern world “to destroy all organic life on earth and shall probably be able one day to destroy even the earth itself,” we have become “doubtful whether politics and the preservation of life are even compatible,” and so we hope either to rid the world of politics or to make politics protect our “vital interests and personal liberty.”²⁴ What is distinctive about the modern world, on Arendt’s account, is that for the first time it is the realm of life and its necessities that needs

²⁰ Arendt, *HC*, p. 322.

²¹ Arendt, *HC*, p. 322.

²² Arendt, *HC*, p. 118. See also pp. 46, 321.

²³ Arendt, *HC*, p. 321.

²⁴ See, respectively, Arendt, *HC*, pp. 268-69, *IIP*, p. 109 and *Lessing*, p. 11. By “vital interests” Arendt means “the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor” (*HC*, p. 7).

politics in order to maintain itself and to thrust itself into public view in the form of the productivity of “society,” and politics, in turn, needs the security of the individual in his or her private life in order to prove its justification and legitimacy. To live in a free state today does not mean one in which many people can participate in government, but one where freedom consists of being left alone in private life.²⁵ Being free has nothing to do with having an interest in matters common to all, but only an interest in essentially private matters such as “life and property.”²⁶ Arendt alleviates this thoroughly pessimistic and degrading view of the present and “future of man” with the suggestion that modern man has not lost his essential capabilities.²⁷

Despite this evidence of Arendt’s concern with a crisis of man, I wish to argue that after she wrote her reply to Voegelin, and probably spurred by their critical exchange, Arendt began to think of totalitarianism less in terms of a crisis of “man” or “human nature” than in terms of a crisis of the “world.” That is, from “Ideology and Terror” onward, including *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s writings are not primarily concerned with the destruction of human nature and its inherent freedom—i.e. our God-given gift for spontaneously beginning an action out of our own resources (a capability akin to Berlin’s Kantian notion of freedom discussed below). Rather, as the 1950s wore on, totalitarianism receded into the background of Arendt’s works—works that take up various crises pertaining not to “man” but to the freedom and the reality of the world and of politics. After 1953 Arendt began to think and to write that what was at stake was not the freedom inherent in human nature but freedom in the political sense of “freedom of

²⁵ Arendt, *IIP*, pp. 141-42.

²⁶ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 142.

²⁷ Arendt, *HC*, pp. 298, 325.

people, whose movements need protection by fixed and stable boundaries of laws, constitutions and institutions.”²⁸ To understand what Arendt was up to in her post-1953 works, in other words, the fear that needs to be examined is not “that man may lose his soul” but that “politics may vanish entirely from the world.”²⁹

Arendt’s Critique of the “Crisis of Man” Discourse

Although *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* display a discourse of “man,” Arendt was a powerful critic of such discourse. In the works that she wrote or published between 1955 and 1959—including “Epilogue” (1955), “Authority in the Twentieth Century” (1956), “Introduction into Politics” (1956-59), *The Human Condition* (1958) and “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts About Lessing” (1959)—she took aim at the “crisis of man” discourse of her time. “[T]he mills of academia nowadays,” Arendt writes in her “Introduction into Politics” manuscript (1956-57), grind out investigations into “the crisis of the modern world” that assume that “it is not so much the world as it is man himself who has come unhinged.”³⁰ Arendt laments that instead of studying our “historically formed world,” academics have taken up newly fashionable sociological and psychological methods of studying “modes of behavior.”³¹ To study humans in terms of modes of behavior, Arendt writes, “excludes man as an active agent, the author of demonstrable events in the world, and demotes him to a creature who merely behaves differently in different situations, on whom one can conduct experiments,

²⁸ Arendt, “Authority in the Twentieth Century,” *Review of Politics* 18:4 (October 1956), p. 409.

²⁹ Arendt, *Reply*, p. 408 and *IIP*, p. 96, respectively.

³⁰ Arendt, *IIP*, pp. 104-5.

³¹ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 105.

and who, one may even hope, can ultimately be brought under control.”³² While Arendt conceded in *The Human Condition* that “modern theories of behaviorism...actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society,”³³ she wanted to resist the view of the world that such studies reinforce, namely that “man...is what we need to change.”³⁴

Indeed, Arendt’s general concern in the latter half of the 1950s was to come to terms with the modern “shift of interest away from the world and toward man.”³⁵ We should recall that one of the main purposes of *The Human Condition* is to understand historically the flight “from the world into the self,” or “modern world alienation,” one of the main symptoms of which is the popular belief that not the world but “human nature”³⁶ is common to all human beings.³⁷ Arendt is troubled by modern world alienation and the shift of interest from the world to the “self” or “man” because it is “profoundly unpolitical.”³⁸ It is a shift away from concern with politics, for “at the center of politics lies concern for the world, not for man.”³⁹

Arendt argues that the political catastrophes of her time are a threat to the “world,” not to “men or even man.”⁴⁰ It is of course true that the world that arises between human beings cannot exist without them. “But,” Arendt insists, “this does not mean that the world and the catastrophes that occur in it should be regarded as a purely

³² Arendt, *IIP*, p. 105.

³³ Arendt, *HC*, p. 322.

³⁴ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 105.

³⁵ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 105.

³⁶ Arendt, *Lessing*, p. 16.

³⁷ Arendt, *HC*, p. 6. On modern world alienation, see *HC*, pp. 208-9 and chapter 6, “The *Vita Activa* and the Modern Age,” pp. 248-325.

³⁸ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 106.

³⁹ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 106. See also p. 175.

⁴⁰ Arendt, *Lessing*, p. 4.

human occurrence, much less that they should be reduced to something that happens to *man* or to the nature of man.”⁴¹ The world is a product of human labor, work, and action; it is not the product, reflection, or expression of “human nature.”⁴² It is because we are “conditioned” by the world that we produce that every development and catastrophe in it affects us, affects our ability to produce the world and the things of this world. The problem with thinking about “the crisis of the modern world” in terms of *man* is that if we think that there must be something wrong with us if we cannot live in modern conditions (of world alienation), then we lose the ability to think politically (which is based in our ability to judge the world), and we turn to psychologists and sociologists to trouble-shoot our human relations rather than take action to change our world.⁴³ It is futile to attempt to change the world by changing ourselves, Arendt argues. “What went wrong is politics, our plural existence,” Arendt said to her 1955 Berkeley class, “and not what we can do and create insofar as we exist in the singular.”⁴⁴

Our Plural Existence: World, World Alienation, and Action-Inspiring Principles

The “world” is a crucial category in Arendt’s thought. Inspired by Heidegger’s concept of *das Man*, “the they,”⁴⁵ the term “world” appears nearly as frequently as the words with which it is contrasted in *The Human Condition*, “man” and “self”. The “world” consists of the common “interspace” between people that both relates and separates them like a table.⁴⁶ The “world,” it is important to emphasize, is not a synonym for the public realm

⁴¹ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 106, emphasis in original.

⁴² Arendt, *IIP*, p. 106.

⁴³ Arendt, *Epilogue*, p. 201.

⁴⁴ Arendt, *Epilogue*, p. 202.

⁴⁵ See Arendt, “Preface” to *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harvest, 1968), p. ix and *CP*, p. 443.

⁴⁶ Arendt, *Lessing*, p. 13.

or political action, and a life lived outside of the world is not a life lived in society or in the private sphere, but a life lived either alone, as in the isolation of the artist or the solitude of the philosopher, or in a worldless relationship, as in love and sometimes in friendship.⁴⁷ Arendt writes that

*wherever human beings come together—be it in private or socially, be it in public or politically—a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from one another. Every such space has its own structure that changes over time and reveals itself in a private context as custom, in a social context as convention, and in a public context as laws, constitutions, statutes, and the like. Wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between space that all human affairs are conducted.*⁴⁸

The world, in short, is “the thing that arises between people and in which everything that individuals carry with them innately can become visible and audible.”⁴⁹

What is important about the concept for Arendt is that it designates everything outside of the self that a plurality of individuals can inhabit together and share in common insofar as they build, preserve, and care for it. As Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*: “[Th]e world into which we are born, would not exist without the human activity which produced it, as in the case of fabricated things; which takes care of it, as in the case of cultivated land; or which established it through organization, as in the case of the body politic. No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings.”⁵⁰ Arendt emphasizes that it is precisely “the presence of other human

⁴⁷ Arendt, *Epilogue*, p. 202.

⁴⁸ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 106, emphasis added. See also p. 176.

⁴⁹ Arendt, *Lessing*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Arendt, *HC*, p. 22.

beings” who see and hear the same things that you and I do that assures us of the “reality” of the world and ourselves.⁵¹

A man-made world is always the reference point for the phenomena of “birth and death” and “appearance and disappearance.”⁵² We mortals are born into the human world and will leave the world through death. During our lifespan we can appear in various smaller worlds and disappear from them. The worlds we inhabit typically existed before we were born and will remain long after we are dead, and for this reason they have the character of structures and institutions that depend on human activity for their existence but transcend human interactions as well. The world always “transcends” the individuals that inhabit it, Arendt emphasizes.⁵³

Even though there cannot be a world without human beings, taking care of a world is not the same as taking care of the human beings that inhabit it. It helps to think of the concept of “world alienation.” As Arendt wrote in a letter to her student Stephen Most, the concept of world alienation is both “very simple and very complex.”⁵⁴ For a simple example Arendt told Mr. Most to consider the university:

When we discuss the crisis in the universities, we hardly ever ask what would be good for them as institutions destined to survive many generations of students and of teachers. Instead, we ask what they are good for—for society, and ultimately for students and/or faculty. That is, the worldly aspect of the problem escapes us. We are alienated from the

⁵¹ Arendt, *HC*, p. 50. See also *HC*, pp. 57, 95, 199, 244. The Church, for example, is a worldly institution concerned with otherworldly matters and its task is to guide its flock, which is in but not of the world, through the world (*HC*, p. 34).

⁵² Arendt, *HC*, p. 97.

⁵³ Letter to David Riesman, March 9, 1949, image 10, p. 009241. General, 1938-1976, n.d.—Riesman, David—1947-1956 (Series: Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d.). Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁴ Letter to Stephen Most, June 15, 1969, image 75, p. 020302. Students—University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.—Correspondence—M—1958-1972 (Series: Subject File, 1949-1975, n.d.). Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

world as that what [sic] was there before us and should remain after we are gone. In my opinion: What should remain is a place in the world from which you can gain a perspective which is “impartial”. This trust of impartiality, no doubt, has first been compromised by the universities themselves and is now further endangered by students—for many reasons, let’s not go into this.

For an even simpler example, Arendt told Mr. Most to consider the hippies: “What are they alienated from? The world, of course. And what do they turn to? Their own dear selves.”⁵⁵ Although the reference point for “the world” in these two examples obviously differs, “alienation” from it involves exclusive concern for what is good for one’s self as opposed to what is good for the particular world which everyone shares in common, be it the student’s university world or the citizen’s common world.

Arendt’s point has to do with motivations for action. In contrast to Arendt’s hypothetical hippie’s actions which are motivated by concern for his or her self, a citizen for Arendt is someone who cares for the world that he or she inhabits with others, particularly the public political world of speech and action, not to achieve personal satisfaction, but to make the world itself more worthy of human life. Concern for the world for Arendt is not a question of the citizen’s selflessness or selfishness—the self has nothing to do with it. As she explained in a letter to David Riesman, there is a difference between being politically active as an individual “psychological” need, such as the psychological need of a man who makes politics his career, and being a citizen who

⁵⁵ Letter to Stephen Most, June 15, 1969, image 76, p. 020303. Students—University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.—Correspondence—M—1958-1972 (Series: Subject File, 1949-1975, n.d.). Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

inhabits a common world with others and for that reason has an interest in caring for it, whether it be the earth, one's country, city, school or apartment building.⁵⁶

As Arendt explains in the last section of *The Human Condition*, since we inhabit a capitalist and scientific world defined by world alienation and earth alienation, the experience of care or love directed toward the world for the sake of the world—Machiavelli's "I love the world more than my own soul"—is nearly impossible for us to understand. Since the rise of the modern age in the seventeenth-century our mundane activities in the world have been motivated by "worry and care about the self" and in the scientist's laboratory they have been guided by the laws and processes derived from an uninhabitable universe outside the earth, "from a universal, astrophysical viewpoint, a cosmic standpoint outside nature itself."⁵⁷ With the advent of capitalism and modern science the "common public world" was eclipsed and love of the world eliminated from the range of meaningful human experiences—but it still remains a possibility, Arendt insists.⁵⁸

The difficulty we have in comprehending "love of the world" is related to the difficulty we have in trying to understand Arendt's notion of action inspired by a "principle." Arendt distinguishes principles from motives that "operate from within the self," and says that principles manifest themselves only in the course of an action, that is, only in the world.⁵⁹ This is not the place to go into all the complexities of the concept of

⁵⁶ Letter to David Riesman, March 9, 1949, image 10, p. 009241. General, 1938-1976, n.d.—Riesman, David—1947-1956 (Series: Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n.d.). Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁷ Arendt, *HC*, pp. 264-65.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *HC*, p. 257.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *WF*, p. 152.

action-inspiring principles.⁶⁰ Suffice it to say that action-inspiring principles are difficult for us to understand because they designate various kinds of motives of action directed toward the world and not the self, and these motives do not come from within the self but from without, from the world. These motives or principles include love of honor or glory or equality or distinction or excellence (depending on the particular character of the world).⁶¹ Love of the world, in other words, manifests itself in terms of these (and many other) principles under different forms of government or with respect to different kinds of institutions. That principles are particular instances of “love of the world” seems to be implied in Arendt’s remark at the American Society of Christian Ethics in 1973, that principles should be thought of as something that “become[s] an example for later...the way Achilles’ courage becomes an example for later generations.”⁶² It is telling that the example of a principle is Achilles’ “courage,” a cardinal political virtue opposed to “love of life”⁶³ (*philopsychia*), which enabled him to enter the common public world where “not life but the world is at stake.”⁶⁴

Toward a Recovery of a Stable World

Between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* Arendt became more concerned with facing up to the consequences for our world of the breakdown of our tradition of political philosophy that had provided each new generation with its

⁶⁰ I attempted to shed some light on principles and their relation to freedom in my “Rereading Hannah Arendt’s ‘What is Freedom?’: Freedom as a Phenomenon of Political Virtuosity,” *Theoria* 131 (June 2012), pp. 84-106, esp. pp. 95-101. For a useful discussion of principles, especially of how they function as evaluative political standards, see Lucy Cane, “Hannah Arendt on the principles of political action,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 14:1 (January 2015), pp. 55-75.

⁶¹ Arendt, *WF*, p. 152.

⁶² Arendt, *Virginia*, image 16, p. 011838.

⁶³ Arendt, *IIP*, p. 122.

⁶⁴ Arendt, *WF*, p. 156.

“understanding of the world and its own experience.”⁶⁵ For Arendt herself, the breakdown of tradition meant the challenge of contemplating political experiences with fresh, childlike eyes, just like the “artists and scientists” of the first half of the twentieth-century, who “suddenly began to discard a great number of their traditional concepts,” leaving an astonishingly “rich and fecund” legacy that continues to inspire others.⁶⁶ The same is true of Arendt’s legacy.

However, the breakdown of the tradition was devastating for the world. Without the tradition to guarantee continuity in history “the world becomes inhuman, inhospitable to human needs...it is violently wrenched into a movement in which there is no longer any sort of permanence.”⁶⁷ That is, as Arendt wrote in the Preface to *Between Past and Future*, “without tradition—which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is—there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it.”⁶⁸ The world has become unhinged.

Thus at stake after totalitarianism for Arendt was the question of a habitable human world in the absence of the traditional pillars of thought that had been the pillars of our traditional forms of government for 2,500 years.⁶⁹ From 1953 onwards, Arendt began to think about the human condition with the goal of illuminating a proper place for

⁶⁵ Arendt, *TMA*, p. 25.

⁶⁶ Arendt’s preliminary remarks for her 1974 New School lectures on “Thinking.” Speeches and Writings—Essays and Lectures—“Thinking”—Lecture, fragments—1974-1975, image 2, n.p. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁷ Arendt, *Lessing*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Arendt, *GBPF*, p. 5.

⁶⁹ Arendt, *Lessing*, p. 10. See also *TET*, p. 87.

human habitation: a relatively stable and permanent world of ontologically articulated activities, boundaries, and thresholds that make it possible for human beings to come into and pass out of being, and in between their birth and death to labor, work, and show themselves in person and manifest themselves in action and speech. Arendt's bold and original thesis in *The Human Condition*—which she wanted to title *Amor Mundi*, love of the world⁷⁰—is that our life on earth is a truly human life only under the conditions of a common world, whose reality and permanence, Arendt argues, is not protected “by the ‘common nature’ of all men,” but by the “human artifice”⁷¹ that must be built, preserved, and cared-for by individuals who exist both outside of and in the midst of the worlds of God-given nature and man-made machines.⁷² Unlike the “crisis of man” theorists who seek to defend what *man* is, is meant to be, or may yet be, Arendt seeks to preserve “what the *world* is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth... a place fit for action and speech.”⁷³

To this end, she explores the “world” in *The Human Condition* by contemplating the thresholds of the human condition—labor, work, action (and to a lesser extent, thinking)—from the viewpoint of the West's historically formed inhabitable human world in its chronological layers stretching from antiquity to the modern age. Her goal is not to construct a vision of *man* as a laboring, working, acting (and thinking) being—the many references to *homo faber*, *animal laborans*, and so on, notwithstanding. Rather, the point is to introduce us to the thresholds of the human world through these fundamental

⁷⁰ Letter to Jaspers, August 6, 1955, *HAKJ*, p. 264.

⁷¹ Arendt, *HC*, pp. 2, 8 (“human artifact”), 52 (“human artifact”), 54, 76, 88, 93, 95-96, 100, 126, 136-139, 148, 150, 152, 167, 169, 171, 173, 204, 230, 268, 289, 309.

⁷² Arendt, *HC*, p. 57. See also pp. 134-35, 199, 244.

⁷³ Arendt, *HC*, p. 173, emphasis added.

activities that escape more and more of us in the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, century. Labor introduces us to a world configured around the biological process of the human body, work to an artificial and more durable world of instruments and things, and action to a world in which it becomes possible for humans to interact with each other in speech and reveal their unique characters and opinions and start new enterprises together. Arendt's purpose in thinking what we are doing is to bring certain features of our modern world into full view to show that our world is still a habitable human world even if the worlds of laboring, working, and acting are more and more outside the range of experience for more and more people.⁷⁴ The question Arendt's contemplation of the human condition raises for us is not only whether we are capable of creating institutional spaces in our political life in which citizens can act and engage in public business, but also whether we are capable of devising ways to ensure that people have meaningful work and labor to fill their lives? Arendt does not offer answers in *The Human Condition* or elsewhere to these questions of practical politics, but she does show us the importance of these questions for the sake of building and caring for a common stable world.

Isaiah Berlin and the Postwar Zeitgeist of “Adjustment”

Like Arendt, Berlin was not optimistic that totalitarianism would inevitable become an artifact of the past. In his letter to George Kennan, who believed in the self-destructive nature of totalitarianism, Berlin reminded him that “moral forces alone,” especially those based on “utilitarianism,” did not suppress or stop totalitarianism, which far from being an “isolated” scourge is rather “an extreme and distorted but only too typical form of

⁷⁴ See Arendt, *HC*, pp. 323-324.

some general attitude of mind from which our own countries are not exempt.”⁷⁵ In Berlin’s writings between 1949 and 1951—including “The Intellectual Life of American Universities” (1949), “Democracy, Communism, and the Individual” (1950), “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century” (1950), Letter to George Kennan (1951), “Jewish Slavery and Emancipation” (1951), and his “Three Essays on Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century” (1950-52) covering the years 1949-1951—we find his most direct and clearest discussions of this “general attitude of mind.” Berlin often refers to this general attitude as the “*Zeitgeist*” of the “new age” to which “Fascist and Communist dictatorships” were obedient.⁷⁶

Writing on “The Intellectual Life of American Universities,” Berlin characterized the new *Zeitgeist* as the demand, typically on the part of social reformers and leaders, for “‘adjustment’, harmony, peace of mind” both within and between human beings, and attributed it to the twentieth-century’s treatment of “anxiety” and “maladjustments and neuroses” as diseases that must be cured. And the best way to cure them is by removing their source or cause, “like an aching tooth.” If human beings were tormenting themselves with troubling questions, the new solution was to cure them of the very desire to ask such questions. “Instead of unraveling you cut,” Berlin wrote. “Instead of answering the question you remove it from the questioner’s consciousness.”⁷⁷

In Berlin’s works, this attitude of mind is displayed for the most part by public authorities eager to engineer society into a well-functioning whole. But private individuals can also display it, and Berlin saw this attitude taking hold in American

⁷⁵ Letter to George Kennan, February 13, 1951, *Enlightening*, pp. 215-219.

⁷⁶ See Berlin, *ILAU*, p. 758 and *JSAE*, p. 181.

⁷⁷ Berlin, *ILAU*, p. 758.

universities. While he was at Harvard in the late 1940s Berlin was shocked to find American students choosing, as the result of misplaced moral guilt, to pursue socially useful tasks rather than study an academic subject for its own sake out of disinterested intellectual curiosity.⁷⁸

Moreover, following the *Zeitgeist* of adjustment, Berlin feared that intellectual disciplines were being created, like psychology, “designed primarily to provide individuals or societies with techniques of more successful adjustment with their fellows, a direct attempt to ‘get at’ them in some non-rational fashion, in order to impose upon them a shape likely to fit the desired social pattern more smoothly, with less friction, less frustration: in short, to promote contentment, stability and an unworried condition of social and individual peace.”⁷⁹ While alleviating the anxieties of maladjustment may be useful, Berlin thought a “fatally high” price was being paid in human “spontaneity and mental energy” for maximum social adjustment. The great efforts devoted “to reduce tension among individuals or societies,” Berlin wrote, have “operate[d] directly to discredit disinterested curiosity if it is too troublesome, the pursuit of knowledge if it is too disturbing, or the development of talents and faculties for their own sakes, as being somehow an evasion of responsibility to society.”⁸⁰ Berlin envisioned the rise of the new social scientific (and pseudo-scientific) disciplines leading not just to the “atrophy [of the] creative impulse” which would lower the level of Western culture, but to the making of thoroughly humanitarian, utilitarian, scientific, calculating, consequence-reckoning

⁷⁸ Berlin, *ILAU*, pp. 754-756.

⁷⁹ Berlin, *ILAU*, p. 759. See also *PITC*, 375-76.

⁸⁰ Berlin, *ILAU*, p. 759.

new men who are completely hostile to the humane values of civilization and individual liberty.⁸¹

In “Democracy, Communism and the Individual,” Berlin described Communist education as requiring “the gradual atrophying of disinterested creative impulses” of men lest “curiosity for its own sake, the spirit of independent individual enquiry, the desire to create or contemplate beautiful things for their own sake, to find out truth for its own sake, to pursue ends because they are what they are and satisfy some deep desire of our nature” frustrate the organization of a well-adjusted social whole.⁸² To this end the individual under Communism must be manipulated, tampered with, and adjusted by public authorities—i.e. Stalin’s “engineers of human souls”—so that “he should only ask those questions the answers to which are readily accessible, that he shall grow up in such a way that he would naturally fit into his society with minimum friction.”⁸³ Berlin was really haunted by attempts by public authorities to tamper with human beings. As he wrote to Kennan, “what turns one inside out...is the spectacle of one set of persons who so tamper and ‘get at’ others that the others do their will without knowing what they are doing; and in this lose their status as free human beings, indeed as human beings at all.”⁸⁴

Similarly, in his *Foreign Affairs* article “Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century,” Berlin describes the new *Zeitgeist* of adjustment as “the state of mind”—again, of public authorities—“in which troublesome questions appear as a form of mental perturbation, noxious to the mental health of individuals and, when too widely discussed, to the health

⁸¹ Berlin, *ILAU*, p. 760.

⁸² Berlin, *DCI*, pp. 5-6. See also *PITC*, pp. 375-76.

⁸³ Berlin, *DCI*, p. 5.

⁸⁴ Letter to George Kennan, February 13, 1951, *Enlightening*, p. 216. See also *TCL*, pp. 22-23, *PGR*, p. 69, *TRR*, p. 177, *FIB*, pp. 66, 202.

of societies.”⁸⁵ He identifies this as “the intellectual outlook which attends the rise of totalitarian ideologies.”⁸⁶ This outlook is dangerous, Berlin explains, because it rejects the rational, democratic methods of argument and persuasion that the “bourgeois” nineteenth-century used to address political problems, in favor of the manipulation of mass behavior by psychological and other scientific forms of conditioning with the goal of producing politically obedient, mentally enslaved, and socially satisfied subjects. The general attitude of the twentieth century, in other words, is to eliminate troubling questions, not by rational thought or persuasion, but by psychological adjustment and social manipulation of the questioners so that they “pursue socially useful tasks, unhampered by disturbing and distracting reflections which have been eliminated by the eradication of their cause.”⁸⁷

Furthermore, the *Zeitgeist* of adjustment was exacerbating what Berlin diagnosed as the neurosis of the age, “agoraphobia.”⁸⁸ The psychologist Carl Otto Westphal first identified the neurosis in 1871. As David Trotter explains in “The Invention of Agoraphobia,” Westphal gave it that name “because its symptoms arose at the moment when the sufferer was about to set off across an open space, or along an empty street, and were at their most intense wherever there was no immediate boundary to the visual

⁸⁵ Berlin, *PITC*, p. 372.

⁸⁶ Berlin, *PITC*, p. 372.

⁸⁷ Berlin, *PITC*, p. 371. See also *Conversations*, p. 141.

⁸⁸ Berlin, *JSM*, p. 27. Arendt identifies something like this neurosis in her 1973 interview with Roger Errera. Errera asked if her contemporaries were afraid of freedom. Arendt responded: “*Ja*. Sure. And rightly so. Only they don’t say it. If they did, one could immediately start a debate. If they would only say it. They are afraid, they are afraid to be afraid. That is one of the main personal motivations. They are afraid of freedom” (Arendt’s interview with Roger Errera, *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2013), p. 119).

field.”⁸⁹ Berlin saw similar symptoms in his own time: “men are terrified of disintegration and of too little direction: they ask like Hobbes’ masterless men in a state of nature, for walls to keep out the raging ocean, for order, security, organization, clear and recognizable authority, and are alarmed by the prospect of too much freedom, which leaves them lost in a vast, friendless vacuum, a desert without paths or landmarks or goals.”⁹⁰

This neurosis played right into the hands of the fanatics and dictators of the twentieth-century who wished to rule over a centrally planned and frictionless society. It meant that there would be many individuals who would prefer “the peace of imprisonment, a contented security, a sense of having at last found one’s proper place in the cosmos, to the painful conflicts and perplexities of the disordered freedom of the world beyond the walls.”⁹¹ Berlin summed up the dire political situation thus: “Growing numbers of human beings are prepared to purchase this sense of security even at the cost of allowing vast tracts of life to be controlled by persons who, whether consciously or not, act systematically to narrow the horizon of human activity to manageable portions, to train human beings into more easily combinable parts—interchangeable, almost prefabricated—of a total pattern.”⁹² Terrified of being left to their own resources in the empty, disordered freedom of the world outside the four walls of their study or private life, such persons all too willingly and uncritically submit themselves to “systems claiming objective authority, spurious theological or metaphysical cosmologies which

⁸⁹ David Trotter, “The Invention of Agoraphobia,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2004), p. 464.

⁹⁰ Berlin, *JSM*, p. 27. See also *SR*, p. 12.

⁹¹ Berlin, *HI*, p. 74.

⁹² Berlin, *PITC*, p. 377. See also p. 368.

undertake to guarantee the eternal validity of moral or intellectual rules and principles.”⁹³ Berlin’s overall opinion of this desire to escape from freedom into an authoritative framework that would satisfy a metaphysical or religious longing “for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven” is that it reveals a spectacularly dangerous “moral and political immaturity.”⁹⁴

Henry Hardy believes that Berlin is referring here “to the moral and political immaturity of monists, totalitarians, extremists, fanatics, fundamentalists.”⁹⁵ But Berlin did not deliver his “Two Concepts of Liberty” lecture before such an audience, and the political immaturity he is worried about applies to ordinary individuals who may lack the courage of their convictions, or even the courage to have convictions. Berlin seems to be speaking about individuals who are prone to agoraphobia and find that going along with the current of history brings relief from the anxiety of pitting oneself against the world. As we shall see in the next section, freedom (or liberty) became a problem for Berlin because the activity of pitting oneself against the world became an activity in desperate need of justification and defense. What is at stake for Berlin is indeed “man,” or rather a view of man as “a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for his choices and able to explain them by reference to his own ideas and purposes.”⁹⁶

Defining Man, Defining Freedom

⁹³ Berlin, *PT*, p. 13.

⁹⁴ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 57.

⁹⁵ Henry Hardy, “Editorial Postscript on the Peroration,” *FIB*, p. 268. Nicholas Kristof’s interpretation is better, but not correct either: “As Kristof put it [“On Isaiah Berlin: Explorer,” *New York Review of Books* (February 25, 2010), pp. 26-7], one must not let ‘appreciation of nuance emasculate one’s capacity to make strong moral judgments’” (ibid).

⁹⁶ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 16.

Unlike Arendt, Berlin is comfortable with and committed to the humanist language of “man” and the aspirations and needs of man’s “nature.” In “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” Berlin asks rhetorically: “who will deny that political problems, e.g. about what men and groups can or should be or do, depend logically and directly on what man’s nature is taken to be?”⁹⁷ Berlin defines the central methodological principle of the “history of ideas” as that “Every political doctrine embodies a vision of man in terms of which alone it can be truly understood.”⁹⁸ This principle effectively separates and distinguishes Berlin’s practice of the history of ideas from that of philosophy, as Robert Denoon Cumming argued in 1973.⁹⁹ This principle means that to understand political thinkers, including political philosophers, it is more important to understand their central vision of man than to entangle oneself in their philosophical arguments, which Berlin regards as little more than ingenious defenses of their central vision.¹⁰⁰ In his “Two Concepts of Liberty” lecture, Berlin argues that “the conception of freedom directly derives from the view that is taken of what constitutes a self, a person, a man. Enough manipulation with the definitions of man, and freedom can be made to mean whatever the manipulator wishes.”¹⁰¹ What, then, is Berlin’s view of man?

Berlin’s Kantian view of man as a free agent capable of moral action that is at the heart of his conception of freedom is perhaps best articulated in his letter to George Kennan which is worth quoting at length:

⁹⁷ Berlin, *PT*, p. 28.

⁹⁸ Berlin, *TDT*, p. 205. See also *HLPM*, 455 and *CWJM*.

⁹⁹ Robert Denoon Cumming, “Is Man Still Man?” *Social Research* 40:3 (Autumn 1973), p. 491.

¹⁰⁰ Berlin, *GS*, p. 298.

¹⁰¹ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 19.

[Kant's] mysterious phrase about men being 'ends in themselves' to which much lip-service has been paid, with not much attempt to explain it, seems to lie in this: that every human being is assumed to possess the capacity to choose what to do, and what to be, however narrow the limits within which his choice may lie, however hemmed in by circumstances beyond his control; that all human love and respect rests upon the attribution of conscious motives in this sense; that all the categories, the concepts, in terms of which we think about and act towards one another—goodness, badness, integrity and lack of it, the attribution of dignity or honour to others which we must not insult or exploit, the entire cluster of ideas such as honesty, purity of motive, courage, sense of truth, sensibility, compassion, justice; and, on the other side, brutality, falseness, wickedness, ruthlessness, lack of scruple, corruption, lack of feelings, emptiness—all these notions in terms of which we think of others and ourselves, in terms of which conduct is assessed, purposes adopted—all this becomes meaningless unless we think of human beings as capable of pursuing ends for their own sakes by deliberate acts of choice—which alone makes nobility noble and sacrifices sacrifices.¹⁰²

This is Berlin's Kantian view of man as an autonomous or self-determined being.

Although Berlin does not use the term "will" here, the key point is that humans are ends in themselves because they have wills of their own. My self, and more precisely my will, is like an inner voice that preaches values, ends, and ideals to me and I am free when I obey it. To be autonomous means "I obey laws, but I have imposed them on, or found them in, my own uncoerced self."¹⁰³ (Arendt thinks Kant's idea that practical freedom consists in "the faculty of the will whose essential activity consists in dictate and command" is "strange indeed."¹⁰⁴)

¹⁰² Letter to Kennan, February 13, 1951, *Enlightening*, p. 214. See also *CWJM*.

¹⁰³ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁴ Arendt, *WF*, p. 145. In general Arendt is dubious that the will can harbor freedom. She accuses the philosophical tradition of distorting the idea of freedom by transposing it from the world to the inner domain of the will. She has the texts and experiences of many philosophers and Christians in mind, perhaps most importantly Augustine's experience of a will that could command but at the same time remain hindered by a counter-will fighting against or disobeying it. The result he famously called a 'monstrosity': the experience of a broken (rather than impotent) will, willing (*velle*) and nilling (*nolle*), "the simultaneous presence of an I-will and an I-will-not" (*WF*, p. 159). For a discussion of the philosophical transposition of freedom see my "Rereading Hannah Arendt's 'What Is freedom?'," pp. 91-94.

Berlin's definition of freedom derives from this Kantian view of man. Introducing the notion of "negative" freedom in the first section of his "Two Concepts of Liberty" lecture, Berlin starts with a common sense view of what it means for a person "to be free" with respect to his or her "activity."¹⁰⁵ When we say that so-and-so is freely doing (or not doing) something, we mean that so-and-so decided to do (or not to do) the activity in question. When we say this we are also saying that the person has the ability to do (or not to do) something else. In other words, we are saying that the person's activity is not coerced; it is not being done because the person is merely obeying the orders of someone else but because the person is doing what he has the mind (or will) to do because he has the mind (or will) to do it, and if his mind (or will) changes, so could (and would) his activity.

Berlin recognizes that negative freedom cannot be defined merely in terms of being left alone to decide and to act, for it includes a positive notion of what it means to be an actor and decider. Berlin makes this point clear in the second section of his lecture, which introduces the notion of "positive" freedom. When we say that a person is free with respect to his or her activity in the "negative" sense defined above, we are saying that the activity arises from the will of an agent who is "moved by reasons, by conscious purposes which are [his or her] own, not by causes...from outside."¹⁰⁶ This is the basic notion of "positive" freedom, which consists in being one's own master, in being a decider and not being decided for, in being "self-directed and not acted upon by external

¹⁰⁵ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 16.

nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them.”¹⁰⁷

At the most basic level, then, Berlin views the notions of negative and positive freedom as “no more than negative and positive ways of saying the same thing.”¹⁰⁸ Together, the notions of negative and positive freedom define freedom as such for Berlin. In positive terms freedom means I command and obey myself. Negatively put, it means that I do not obey the will or orders of other human beings. I am (positively) an “end” in myself and (negatively) not a means or instrument for the attainment of the ends of other human beings. I am autonomous.

The Question of Political Liberty

An autonomous human being is one thing; an association of them is another. For Berlin, it is the task of the bearers of “public authority,”¹⁰⁹ statesmen and other political leaders, to rule over free individuals so as to create and maintain some kind of “association”—i.e., a human society.¹¹⁰ Following Hobbes, Berlin argues that the chief task of public authority is to impose some limits on the otherwise unlimited basic freedom of individuals for the sake of achieving at least the minimal measure of order, security, justice, happiness, etc., without which no human association could survive because human beings’ “minimum needs would not be satisfied.”¹¹¹

This ongoing task of all public authority for Berlin raises the question of “political liberty”: “What is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or

¹⁰⁷ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁸ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 9.

¹¹⁰ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Berlin, *TCL*, pp. 8-9.

should be left to do or be what he wants to do or be, without interference by other persons?”¹¹² Berlin frames the question of political liberty in this way because he wants to keep our attention on the extent of “the area of private life” protected from the invasion of public authority in which a person is free in the basic sense defined above.¹¹³ As he goes on to argue, the political philosophers’ view of the area in which human beings should be free to act according to their own wills is related to their views of human nature. Liberals with more optimistic views of the possibility for humans to harmonize their interests typically advocate “a large area for private life,” whereas thinkers with a more pessimistic view of human nature typically argue for a small area for private life and, by consequence, a large area of life over which centralized public authority is in charge.¹¹⁴

On the basis of his Kantian view of man, and sympathetic to the great nineteenth-century English and French political philosophers (Locke and Mill in England, Constant and Tocqueville in France), Berlin argues that public authority ought to commit itself to protecting “a certain minimum area of personal freedom which must on no account be violated, for if it is overstepped, the individual will find himself in an area too narrow for even that minimum development of his natural faculties which alone makes it possible to pursue, and even to conceive, the various ends which men hold good or right or sacred.”¹¹⁵ He qualifies this by noting that this area of freedom in private life, however it is determined, cannot or should not be determined by an “absolute principle” because

¹¹² Berlin, *TCL*, p. 7.

¹¹³ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 9. See also p. 14. For references to private life as the area for free activity, see *TCL*, pp. 10 (“private life”), 11 (“freedom and privacy”), 14 (“privacy itself”).

¹¹⁴ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 10.

¹¹⁵ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 9.

under varying historical circumstances it will always be necessary to curtail the freedom of some to a greater or lesser extent to secure the freedom of others.¹¹⁶ This is the whole “function of law,” to prevent free individuals from colliding into each other by coercing some (or all) for the sake of the liberty of others.¹¹⁷ Adhering absolutely to one principle, however, would be foolish for those in public authority who aim to create an association that guarantees something close to equal minimum freedom for everyone. However the principle is determined, Berlin’s main point is clear: “We must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom if we are not to ‘degrade or deny our nature’.”¹¹⁸ With respect to this minimum Berlin does not side with any particular (liberal) point of view, for everyone agrees, even Hobbes, “that some portion of human existence must remain independent of the sphere of social control [by “social control” he means the control of society by the state].”¹¹⁹

Who would disagree? Who would argue for total domination of the individual or for total self-surrender to the state in the name of freedom? For Berlin the answer is: those who think that “man” is not “a being with a life of his own to live.”¹²⁰ Those who do not believe in an “individualistic” conception of man would take issue with Berlin’s Kantian account of the importance of protecting personal freedom.¹²¹ As Berlin remarked to Steven Lukes, “[my lecture] really has to do with the fact that I was maddened by all the Marxist cheating which went on, all the things that were said about ‘true liberty’,

¹¹⁶ Berlin, *TCL*, 10n1.

¹¹⁷ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 11.

¹¹⁸ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 11.

¹¹⁹ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 11.

¹²⁰ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 12.

¹²¹ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 12. See also p. 17

Stalinist and communist patter about ‘true freedom’.”¹²² Berlin was maddened by the notion, which he heard during his visit to Russia in 1945, that “Truth liberates.”¹²³

Berlin associates this notion of freedom with the attitude of several “armed prophets” of the twentieth-century: Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot.¹²⁴ Rendered in the image of an elite of Platonic guardians, Berlin imagines their profoundly anti-political thought process for justifying their crimes thus:

Since I know the only true path to the ultimate solution of the problem of society, I know which way to drive the human caravan; and since you are ignorant of what I know, you cannot be allowed to have liberty of choice even within the narrowest limits, if the goal is to be reached. You declare that a given policy will make you happier, or freer, or give you room to breathe; but I know that you are mistaken, I know what you need, what all men need; and if there is resistance based on ignorance or malevolence, then it must be broken and hundreds of thousands may have to perish to make millions happy for all time. What choice have we, who have the knowledge, but to be willing to sacrifice them all?¹²⁵

In “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Berlin imagines the thought process of the ignorant individual wisening up to and understanding why he is being induced or forced to obey public authority:

Only the truth liberates, and the only way in which I can learn the truth is by doing blindly today, what you, who know it, order me, or coerce me, to do, in the certain knowledge that only thus will I arrive at your clear vision, and be free like you.¹²⁶

For Berlin, this is the Marxist or Communist answer to the central question of politics:

“‘Why should I (or anyone) obey anyone else?’ ‘Why Should I not live as I like?’ ‘Must I obey?’ ‘If I disobey, may I be coerced? By whom, and to what degree, and in the name of

¹²² Berlin, *CWSL*, p. 92

¹²³ Berlin, *MWRW*, p. 374.

¹²⁴ Berlin, *POI*, p. 13.

¹²⁵ Berlin, *POI*, p. 13. See also *HSR*, p. 10 and *HI*, pp. 41-42.

¹²⁶ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 36.

what, and for the sake of what?”¹²⁷ Berlin’s overarching concern in his lecture is indeed with the answer to the central question of politics given by “two civilizations and two systems of ideas”—the modern capitalist West and Communism—“each claiming the allegiance of very large numbers of men.”¹²⁸ Berlin framed his lecture in terms of the sharp antagonism between the capitalist West and Communism not for philosophical reasons but to make his listeners choose sides, to shock them out of complacency. As Tony Judt would remind us, “[For] Cold War liberals...Communism really *was* the enemy: you had to make a choice, and you could not pretend there was a third way.”¹²⁹

The very notion that I might not necessarily be sacrificing my freedom by obeying political authority is deliberately excluded from Berlin’s view of man and freedom. Berlin represents this notion as serving as a slippery slope to total domination of man in the name of freedom.¹³⁰ What critics of Berlin’s lecture tend to overlook is that his principal target is not democracy or decolonization, but forms of monism, such as communist totalitarianism. Only on the basis of the monist assumption that a social whole can be harmoniously ordered in accordance with some rationalist or metaphysical pattern in which all good things go together, can rulers justify the exercise of their public authority to bring about this pattern by claiming that they “know” what individuals need “better than they know it themselves,” and if these individuals were fully rational they

¹²⁷ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 6.

¹²⁸ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 6.

¹²⁹ Tony Judt (with Timothy Snyder), *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 228, emphasis in original.

¹³⁰ See Berlin, *TCL*, p. 16. For a critical analysis of Berlin’s slippery slope argument, see James Tully, “‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ in Context,” in *Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom*, eds. Bruce Baum and Robert Nichols (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 33-35.

would not need to be coerced for their own good.¹³¹ The reasoning here, as Berlin repeats himself, is that if I believe that I know the true goal of man, then this goal “must be identical with his freedom,” and so I am in a position “to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf” of their true goal which they would freely choose if they were wise, and to claim that while I am torturing them they are truly free.¹³²

His message is that either “a minimum area is guaranteed to all men within which they can act as they wish,” or “the only principles and values left will be those guaranteed by theological or metaphysical or scientific systems claiming to know the final truth about man’s place in the universe, and his functions and goals therein.”¹³³ Those who believe that they know the truth and that the truth liberates, as Berlin warns us in several essays, will use “any method of bringing this final state nearer...no matter how much freedom were sacrificed to forward its advance.”¹³⁴ Berlin could have made this point clearer in his lecture; but I think this is his definitive position in the antagonism between the West and Communism, which is after all the overarching frame of reference in which his defense of a Kantian view of man and his freedom must be understood. When read in the larger context of the Cold War, agoraphobia, and the midcentury zeitgeist of adjustment, Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty” lecture reveals a defense of the artist, *engagé* rebel or existentialist who obeys an “inner impulse” and “this obedience to the

¹³¹ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 18.

¹³² Berlin, *TCL*, p. 18.

¹³³ Berlin, *HBIL*, p. 128.

¹³⁴ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 54. See also *HSR*, p. 12, *DCI*, p. 1 and “A Message to the 21st Century,” *The New York Review of Books* (October 23, 2104), p. 37.

inner impulse is the realization of an ideal, that for the sake of which he lives, that to which he dedicates himself and which he regards as his mission and his calling.”¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Berlin, *FIB*, p. 65. Berlin did not write much on the existentialists. He called himself an existentialist, though, and more than once. As Berlin wrote to Arthur Schlesinger on January 12, 1955: “I feel affinities with the late Lord Acton and shall ultimately develop into a hideous compound of Herzen and Acton, with dashes of radical positivism and existentialism loosely thrown in....oh, I forgot to add a dash of Niebuhr, which all right though it may be in itself, makes the cocktail even more depraved” (*Enlightening*, p. 470). As Berlin said to Steven Lukes: “In a sense I am an existentialist—that’s to say I commit myself, or find that I am in fact committed, to constellations of certain values [i.e. a way of life]. This is how I live. Others may live differently. But I am what I am” (*CWSL*, p. 101). Stephen Spender’s August 3, 1953, journal entry documents Berlin’s reaction against A. J. Ayer’s depiction of him as against the existentialists: “Isaiah was very much against A. J. Ayer’s article on Nihilism which I am publishing in *Encounter* [‘The Meaning of Nihilism,’ *Encounter*, October 1954, but published originally under the title “Philosophy at Absolute Zero”]. He said that I was quite right to publish it, but nevertheless he thought that it contested points of view which Freddie attributed to the philosophers whom he criticized, which had in fact never been held by nihilists, existentialists or any other kind of philosopher. He said he had a grudge against Freddie ever since the time he had read his essay on existentialism in *Horizon*, which had put him against the existentialists....Isaiah said if one really understood music one understood the wholeness behind other things and that the failure of Freddie was really the failure to understand music. This I think was the drift of Isaiah’s arguments, although there was a good deal that I did not take in” (Spender, *New Selected Journals 1939-1995*, pp. 144-45). I find Berlin’s existentialism to be very similar to Camus’s in *The Rebel*. For Berlin’s highly sympathetic remarks on the modern existentialists as the true heirs of the romantic movement, see *MIP*, p. 10, *HI*, p. 76, *PT*, p. 13, *EUV*, p. 201, *TRR*, pp. 190-91, *RR*, pp. 72, 139-47, *Dialogue*, p. 203, *EIPS*, and his letter to Jacqueline de Proyart, September 1960, *Building*, pp. 8-10. In view of his reflections, which he carried out through readings of Russian novelists (Tolstoy, Turgenev, etc), on the search for the “ends of life” and answers to the “accursed questions” of life, one could argue that Berlin should be placed in a broad tradition of existential Russianism concerned with the range and complexity of being human. On this tradition see Val Vinokur, “Russian Existentialism, or Existential Russianism,” in *Situating Existentialism*, eds. Jonathan Judaken and Robert Bernasconi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 37-64. For a reading of Berlin that suggests a significant connection with the writings of the Russian-Jewish existentialist religious philosopher Lev Shestov, see John Gray’s new introduction to his *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of His Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 17.

CONCLUSION

During the course of my research for this dissertation I came across the following thought in a letter that Isaiah Berlin wrote to Nicolas Nabokov: “[I]n general there is a thesis to be written about the interrelationships of writers of the same period and place which appeal to the same public, feel it a duty to be in certain relations with each other, but nevertheless develop some kind of complicated and awkward nexus which they attempt to disguise in all kinds of ways—this certainly happened with, for example, Stendhal and Balzac, Flaubert and Merimée, etc.”¹ Although Arendt and Berlin were both of the same period, and sometimes were found in the same place, I quickly discovered that they were not the Stendhal and Balzac or Flaubert and Merimée of the twentieth-century. They did not write any letters to each other or engage directly with each other’s works. While they appealed to similar audiences to some extent, they felt no duty to see or to speak to each other and they certainly did not disguise their contempt for each other. If I was going to write about both of them, I realized that focusing on their interrelationship, as interesting as that may be, was not going to get me very far.

However, tracing the course of their lives and careers to see where they intersected—in the late 1940s in New York around Zionist politics, in the mid-1950s in Italy for the Congress for Cultural Freedom, in the late 1960s at Harvard for a conference on Soviet Russia—was productive in that it served as a reminder that for all their irreconcilable differences they lived in the same world and occasionally found themselves in the same room together as activists, professors, or intellectuals concerned

¹ Letter to Nabokov, June 25, 1970, *Building*, p. 426.

with understanding and facing up to the political issues and predicaments of their time, above all the issues of Zionism, totalitarianism, and political freedom (or liberty). Moreover, I realized that an important turning-point in the story of their lives, as told by themselves and by their friends and students (e.g. Ignatieff's *Isaiah Berlin* and Young-Buehl's *Hannah Arendt*), is that they consciously decided after their wartime experiences to leave the academic discipline of philosophy in order to write and think about politics in the relatively new academic disciplines of the "history of ideas" for Berlin and "new political philosophy" or "political theory" for Arendt. This led me to wonder about the significance of their becoming ex-philosophers after the war. Was this just a personal or career decision, or was there something about political philosophy itself that they could no longer abide after encountering the horrors of totalitarianism? I thought that if I could get a better understanding of their view of the tradition of political philosophy and its relationship to totalitarianism, I could better understand and appreciate their contributions to post-totalitarian "political theory."

For the purpose of understanding what it was about the tradition of political philosophy that both Arendt and Berlin could not abide or endorse after the appearance of totalitarianism, and how they both responded theoretically to this crisis, I decided to investigate their respective approaches to totalitarianism's relationship to the Western tradition of political philosophy. What is politically striking is that they both decided that the Western tradition of political philosophy—or at least the main "current" or "thesis" of that tradition—consisted of "monism." And they both argued that this tradition, which they traced back to Plato, was in a sense both realized in and defeated by the rise of

totalitarianism. That is, the tradition of political philosophy seemed to render itself superfluous for understanding and fighting back against totalitarianism in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, and Arendt and Berlin connected this sense of the death of the tradition to the tendency of traditional political philosophy to conceptualize individuals as functional parts of one living organism as though human beings did not exist in the plural and in pursuit of a variety of values and activities. This shared view of the tradition's—and totalitarianism's—betrayal of the essential freedom and plurality of mankind is the impetus behind bringing Arendt and Berlin together in this dissertation to engage with the topics of totalitarianism, the tradition of political philosophy, the significance of Machiavelli for post-totalitarian political theory, human plurality as a mode of engaging politics, and modern world alienation or agoraphobia and the midcentury zeitgeist of social adjustment. When read together—which political theorists as a rule almost never do—these topics emerged as important to the development of Arendt and Berlin's respective bodies of anti-totalitarian, “pluralist” thought.²

Since Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and its Critics* (1984) anthologized Berlin as a modern liberal who affirms the ideal of freedom of choice, and Arendt as modern critic of liberalism who longs to see freedom institutionalized “in the republican sense of a shared public life,” their names and works have met each other in more or less polemical confrontation, as representative of the traditions of liberalism and republicanism.³

² To be sure, their writings and lives have been brought together for philosophical and political discussion around “Jewish questions” of assimilation and Zionism. See, e.g., Joan Cocks, *Passion and Paradox: Intellectuals Confront The National Question* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), ch. 3.

³ Michael Sandel, “Introduction,” *Liberalism and its Critics*, ed. M. Sandel (New York: New York University Press, 1984), p. 11. Berlin seems to have become known as a “liberal,” and to clearly identify himself as such, after his “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1957) lecture, though the roots of his liberalism go back at least to the early 1950s when he began writing *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*. Although

Likewise, in terms of interest in the possibilities of “Post-Holocaust Philosophy,” Berlin has been ignored as a typical British analytical philosopher who dismissed totalitarianism as merely an “aberration” in the face of the otherwise valid Western tradition, whereas Arendt, educated in “Continental” German philosophy, tends to be associated with the radical questioning of Western philosophy in the work of Adorno, Benjamin, Levinas, Schmitt, and others.⁴ While there is a great deal of truth in these contrasting categorizations and treatments of Arendt and Berlin’s thought (liberal vs. republican, analytic/British vs. Continental/German), one basic conclusion to be drawn from this dissertation is that these contrasts are overdrawn and have prevented scholars from pursuing potentially illuminating comparisons of Arendt and Berlin. This dissertation establishes and pursues several different topics in terms of which more direct and dynamic comparisons of the two could be pursued in the future.

Another conclusion worth drawing from this dissertation with respect to the question of the necessity and possibilities of political theory after totalitarianism is that contemporary political theorists seem to have lost sight of the fact that in the aftermath of totalitarianism and two world wars, neither Arendt nor Berlin thought that the task of post-totalitarian political theory was to put forward political visions of human dignity and freedom as ideals to be realized; nor did they simply strive to remind us of horrors to be avoided. The need to point this out arises from the fact that contemporary political

Arendt never identified as a liberal, she did not claim, therefore, to be a republican, and the label “republican” was not generally or widely applied to her political thought while she was alive. As Margaret Canovan recalls, “At the time of her death in 1975 she was known as a champion of participatory politics and regarded in some quarters as a utopian idealist.” Canovan, “Hannah Arendt: Republicanism and Democracy,” ch. 2 in *Liberal Democracy and its Critics*, eds. April Carter and Geoffrey Stokes (Polity Press, 1988), p. 39. Arendt became known as a kind of republican thanks to Canovan’s efforts.

⁴ See, e.g., Josh Cohen, “Post-Holocaust Philosophy,” in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 469-486.

theorists have become preoccupied by the issue of a positive or constructive political “vision” (or lack thereof) in the works of Arendt and Berlin. Arendt’s work has assumed a central position of importance in highly philosophical debates about “vision” in modern political theory, where her vision (or lack thereof) is set apart from the case of Berlin, who is either described as her opposite or hastily dismissed from further reflection.⁵

In addition to the vision/no-vision debate, Arendt and Berlin are increasingly appreciated in the twenty-first century for their critiques of grand, utopian expectations in politics. They are presented as modest and realistic theorists who sought to lower our political expectations to the avoidance of the “horror” and “fear,” as Judith Shklar famously put it, “created by arbitrary, unexpected, unnecessary, and unlicensed acts of force and by habitual and pervasive acts of cruelty and torture” performed by the state and its agents.⁶ Shklar herself noted that Berlin’s liberalism resembles what she called “the political liberalism of fear,” and several scholars have interpreted Berlin’s writings in terms of Shklar’s concept.⁷ Likewise, scholars of Arendt’s thought such as Ben Berger,

⁵ Tracy B. Strong’s *Politics without Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) takes Arendt’s thought as exemplary of thought that “rejects the need for, and the possibility of, a ‘vision’”—meaning thought that relies on “God, or nature, or history” (pp. 7, 1). Strong ignores Isaiah Berlin, the very thinker, ironically, whom Ronald Beiner explicitly excludes from his book, *Political Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), for *not* offering a political philosophy because, Beiner claims, he does *not* have a particular conception of the good (pp. xviii-xix). Arendt, for Beiner, is an epic “vision” theorist who, like Aristotle, conceives of human beings as civic animals by nature. Hans Sluga’s portrait of Arendt as a “diagnostic thinker” in his *Politics and the Search for the Common Good* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) combines Arendt’s normative vision of the good of politics with her genealogically oriented, diagnostic examination of the experiences of actors and thinkers in the realm of politics. Sluga rejects the liberalism of Berlin (and Mill and von Humboldt) because it is not grounded on experience and history but on an ahistorical concept of human nature loaded with spurious normative import (pp. 78-79).

⁶ Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 23, 29.

⁷ For Shklar’s account of Berlin, see “The Liberalism of Fear,” pp. 28-29. For interpretations of Berlin’s liberalism in line with the political liberalism of fear tradition, see Jan-Werner Müller, “Fear and Freedom: On ‘Cold War Liberalism,’” *European Journal of Political Theory* 7:1 (2008), pp. 45-64; George Crowder, *Isaiah Berlin: Liberty, Pluralism and Liberalism* (Polity, 2004), p. 173; Michael Walzer’s introduction to

Margaret Canovan, Rainer Forst, and Tony Judt have articulated analogous “republicanism of fear” interpretations of her work.⁸ For such scholars, the work of Arendt and Berlin continues to have relevance amid the violence and terrors of our time because they were focused on preserving, as Tony Judt put it, “our historical awareness of the consequences of *not* forging and preserving a modern, democracy polity.”⁹

While Arendt and Berlin can be interpreted and appreciated as presenting Nazi totalitarianism and Russian communism as negative standards that tell us what to be against, to do so is to give up the very task that they were both struggling with after totalitarianism: the task of reformulating political theory on anti-totalitarian and pluralist premises. Arendt, for her part, called for the recovery and conceptualization of past political experiences that were lost on the tradition, as well as for new conceptualizations of old and well-known political experiences. As Arendt remarked in 1966: “We must try to think and to judge and to act not without taking account of the past but without trusting the validity of any so-called lessons of history. This is difficult and uncomfortable, but it also contains great challenges and perhaps even promises.”¹⁰ If Arendt’s books, essays,

Berlin’s *The Hedgehog & the Fox* (New York: Touchstone, 1986) and Ira Katznelson, “Isaiah Berlin’s Modernity,” *Social Research* 66:4 (Winter 1999), pp. 1079-1101. For a dissent from negative interpretations of Berlin’s liberalism that overlook his positive appreciation of human complexity and variety, see Jonathan Allen’s unpublished conference paper, “Isaiah Berlin’s Anti-Procrustean Liberalism: Ideas, Circumstances, and the Protean Individual” (APSA, 2003).

⁸ For interpretations of Arendt that find her republicanism of fear the most relevant and enriching aspect of her political thought, see Ben Berger, “Out of Darkness, Light: Arendt’s Cautionary and Constructive Political Theories,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 8:2 (2009), pp. 157-82; Tony Judt, “At Home in This Century,” *The New York Review of Books* 42:6 (April 6, 1995); Rainer Forst, “The Republicanism of Fear and Redemption: On the Topicality of Hannah Arendt’s Political Theory,” in his *Justification and Critique*, trans. C. Cronin (Polity, 2014), pp. 165-176; Margaret Canovan, “Terrible Truths: Hannah Arendt on Politics, Contingency and Evil,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53:208 (1999), pp. 173-189.

⁹ Judt, *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, p. 38, emphasis in original.

¹⁰ Arendt, *Christianity and Crisis: A Bi-Weekly Journal of Christian Opinion* 26:9 (May 30, 1966), p. 113. See also Arendt’s interview with Adelbert Reif, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution: A Commentary,”

and lectures had an overarching aim, which justified her monumental efforts, it was to help her students and her generation to recognize present realities as such and take the trouble to think and talk about them. This is why Arendt wrote. It is also why she thought that the breakdown of the tradition was one of the greatest advantages of her time, for it justified her belief that we really have to think anew about the kind of world we live in and the kind of world that we want to live in.

For Berlin's part, he believes that political theorists ought to learn from historical predicaments, conflicts, and movements. But in order to do so theorists must understand them in terms of "the ideas or attitudes to life involved in them, which alone make such movements a part of human history, and not mere natural events."¹¹ This is not to say that "all historical movements or conflicts between human beings are reducible to movements or conflicts of ideas or spiritual forces, nor even that they are effects (or aspects) of them"¹²—which is a typical criticism of Berlin by more historically oriented intellectual historians, particularly those associated with the Cambridge School.¹³ The point of trying to understand the "ideas" and "attitudes" to life involved in historical phenomena and predicaments is that political theorists must study the relationship between changing human attitudes and the historical predicaments in which they are involved in order for

translated by Denver Lindley, in Arendt, *The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2013), pp. 79-80.

¹¹ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 6.

¹² Berlin, *TCL*, p. 6.

¹³ J. G. A. Pocock has criticized Berlin and other theorists for doing history badly: "That is, they think as philosophers; they see something going on in history which they think philosophically significant, and they (1) write its history, which may be legitimate, (2) write history as the history of this philosophic event or contest. Thus history becomes the war between the Open Society and its Enemies (Popper), or positive and negative liberty (Berlin), or ancient and modern philosophy (Strauss)." Pocock's personal correspondence with David Weinstein and Avihu Zakai, quoted in their article, "Exile and interpretation: Popper's re-invention of the history of political thought," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11:2 (June 2006), p. 209n101.

“political words and notions and acts” to be intelligible at all.¹⁴ Moreover, because political theory deals with “the source, scope and validity of certain human goals,” Berlin argues, “it cannot, from the very nature of its interests, avoid evaluation; it is thoroughly committed not only to the analysis of, but to conclusions about the validity of, ideas of the good and the bad, the permitted and the forbidden,” and so on.¹⁵ In short, for Berlin, political theorists must not only analyze but also judge the value and validity of moral and political judgments. And in order to make such judgments political theorists must have a conception of what it is to be human, a political doctrine about “what men are, have been, could be.”¹⁶ So while learning from historical events and movements is important for Berlin, it requires of political theorists an understanding of what human beings are and what worldly relationships between them make them human.

A striking feature of Arendt and Berlin’s work, which they share with Albert Camus and others of their generation, is their emphasis on a kind of search for a political theory or political philosophy of the present. “Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present,” Camus wrote in the last chapter of *The Rebel*, and this idea seems to guide Arendt and Berlin’s thinking about politics at a deep level as well.¹⁷ To further deepen our understanding of Arendt and Berlin’s contributions to post-totalitarian political theory, future research efforts should explore their shared emphasis on what Jeffrey Isaac described as “the presentness of action” as against “the faith of modern

¹⁴ Berlin, *TCL*, p. 6.

¹⁵ Berlin, *PT*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Berlin, *PT*, p. 20.

¹⁷ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1991 [1951]), p. 304.

ideologies in the future consequences of present means.”¹⁸ By exploring their complex arguments against modern (i.e. nineteenth-century) political theoretical notions of “progress” as antithetical to human freedom and dignity, as destructive as a guide to or criterion of action, and as a pseudo-scientific refuge from reality, we can perhaps achieve an even better sense of their theoretical understandings of the limits and promises of politics and political theory after totalitarianism.

¹⁸ Jeffrey C. Isaac, “Situating Hannah Arendt on Action and Politics,” *Political Theory* 21:3 (August 1993), p. 538. In addition to the presentness of action, Arendt emphasizes the presentness of thinking in the quotation from Karl Jaspers that she uses as the epigraph to *Origins*: “To succumb neither to the past nor the future. What matters is to be entirely present” (Arendt, *Burden*, p. vii. See also *GBPF*).

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