

Arendt, Heidegger, and the Western Philosophical Tradition

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I. Introduction

In this essay I want to suggest that the antagonism many critics feel towards Arendt's attempt to conceptualize action as an end in itself – as a “pure” form of *praxis* – rests on a fairly basic misunderstanding.

What is this misunderstanding? It is the idea that Arendt's theory of political action is primarily a *normative* theory directed against either: a) the advent of mass democracy and its attendant pathologies; or b) the rise of the social and the reduction of politics to economics that accompanies it. To be sure, both these events play a central role in Arendt's thought. But her theory of political action is misunderstood if it is seen as essentially a *reaction* to one or both of these “late modern” tendencies. Framed in this way, there seems little doubt that Arendt is pursuing a rearguard “elitist” strategy against the increasingly inclusive and increasingly social-character of politics in the modern age.

This framing of Arendt's political theory is, however, wrong. While useful to her critics, it fails to take sufficient account of her intellectual trajectory. This was a trajectory from the attempt to *understand* how the supremely destructive political phenomenon of totalitarianism became possible in the heart of civilized Europe; to a deeper engagement with the proto-totalitarian tendencies underlying the thought of Karl Marx; to – finally – a full-fledged and remarkably deep engagement with the Western tradition of political thought from Plato to Marx. This is a tradition which Arendt increasingly came to view as anti-pluralistic and (indeed) anti-political in many of its most characteristic tropes, concerns, and conclusions.

We can characterize the main phases in this intellectual trajectory in “methodological” as well as substantive terms. Arendt, we might say, moves from the hermeneutic-analytic attempt to understand the constellation of events, practices, and mentalities that made totalitarianism possible; to the genealogical attempt to locate proto-totalitarian tendencies in the thought of Karl Marx (the inheritor of many of the Enlightenment's most cherished

political and social hopes); to, finally, a "deconstructive" encounter with the Western tradition of political thought itself. This encounter is driven by the desire to recover the experiential basis of a "genuine" or authentic politics centered on human plurality, speech, and the exchange of opinion in the public sphere. This layer of experience – "the political" in its original (Greek) incarnation – had been "covered over" by a fabrication model of action, a model installed by a philosophic tradition deeply hostile to human plurality and the "irresponsibility and uncertainty of outcome" it apparently created in the public-political realm.

It is at *this* level – and not at the level of any supposed existentialist contempt for the "inauthentic" they-self (*das Man*) – that we encounter Arendt's real debt to Heidegger. This debt has nothing to do with the politics of either Heidegger or the so-called "political existentialists." Indeed, it is difficult to think of a deeper critic of Heidegger's philosophical politics – not to mention other fascist-leaning intellectuals – than Hannah Arendt. Rather, the debt is – if I may put it in these terms – more "methodological" in character. It concerns not the *substance of the political* (about which Heidegger and Arendt were in total disagreement), but the manner in which one might go about recovering experiences and meanings that a layer of obfuscating tradition had plunged into obscurity, if not complete oblivion. To quote Arendt's well-known characterization of her friend Walter Benjamin's "method," a method which had remarkable affinities to both Heidegger and her own:

...this thinking, fed by the present, works with the "thought fragments" it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living – as "thought fragments," as something "rich and strange," and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*.¹

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1968), pp. 205-206.

This passage gives a more or less precise description of what Arendt herself was up to when she attempted – against the entire weight of the tradition from Plato to Marx – to "recover" *praxis* in its "pure," pre-philosophic form. This recovery finds its fullest articulation in the chapter on action in *The Human Condition*. The point of that chapter *is not* – as many of her critics have charged – to resurrect a long-gone *polis* politics. Rather, it is to delve behind or beneath the intervening layer of our philosophic tradition – a tradition hostile in many respects to politics – in order to bring forth, in "crystallized" form, the phenomenological basis of politics as practiced by diverse equals in a public space. As Arendt says in her Benjamin essay, "the Greek *polis* will continue to exist at the bottom of our political existence – that is, at the bottom of the sea – for as long as we use the word 'politics'."²

Like Heidegger, whose own thinking was characterized by a "digging quality peculiar to itself," Arendt's thought was driven by a desire to "get to the bottom," to bring up something "rich and strange" that would serve not as a model, but as a means to put our most ossified prejudices about the nature of politics into question. The value of a book like *The Human Condition* is not to be found in any set of *prescriptions* it supposedly offers about the public realm (what to let in, what to keep out – or, more pointedly, *who* to let in and *who* to keep out). Rather, it is to be found in the glimpse it offers us of a "pure" *praxis*, a *praxis* prior to its philosophical conceptualization and subsequent "dis-essencing." This project – which proceeds, to quote Arendt, through an enormous "distillation" of Greek and Roman "non-philosophical literature...poetic, dramatic, historical, and political writings, whose articulation lifts experience into a realm of splendor which is not the realm of conceptual thought" – has a quite specific, "non-normative" goal.³ In the words of George Kateb, it aims to "do what has never been done." It aims to "supply a philosophical account of the *meaning* of political action" considered as an "end in itself" – that is, as the center of a certain (lost or forgotten) way of life.⁴

But why the need to "go to the bottom," to seek out the "rich and strange"? Why is providing us with a glimpse of "pure" *praxis* so important? In order to understand Arendt's "deconstructive" strategy (and I use the word "deconstructive" in its original Heideggerian, not Derridean, sense), I will have to say a word or two about Arendt's reading of the "great

² Ibid., p. 204.

³ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 165.

⁴ George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld), p. 7.

tradition" of political thought from Plato to Marx. For it is only with this reading in mind – a reading found in *The Human Condition*, but also in *On Revolution* as well as the essays in *Between Past and Future* – that we can make sense of her theory of political action, her conception of the public realm, and (last but not least) her intellectual debt to Heidegger.

II. Heideggerian Themes in *The Human Condition*

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt notes that political action, as performed by a plurality of actors in a defined public space (such as the Athenian assembly or agora), has several irreducible features. First, it presupposes a condition of civic equality or "no-rule" – *isonomia*, as the Greeks would call it. This means that an authentically political public space is one characterized not only by the absence of coercion or violence (such as master inflicts on a slave, or a ruler imposes on his subjects), but by the absence of the sort of authoritarian hierarchy Plato and (to a lesser degree) Aristotle wished to introduce into the Greek political world through their political philosophies.

Second, it presumes a genuine *plurality* of actors – that is, a wide range of individual citizens who see "the public thing" from different perspectives. As Arendt puts it, "the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspective and aspects."⁵ Such perspectives are not a given, nor are they a function (as we like to think today) of one's "identity" or affinity group. Rather, such perspectives are the articulation of an individual point of view, an articulation that occurs only through the *active* formation and exchange of opinions with others. "Opinions," Arendt writes, "never belong to groups but exclusively to individuals. [They] will rise whenever men communicate freely with one another and have a right to make their views public..."⁶ *Doxa* is not a deficient mode of appearance, somewhere between genuine knowledge of reality and complete ignorance or non-being.⁷ It is, rather, the essential medium of a *political* way of being-together.

Third (and following from the previous two), the essential *mode* of political action is persuasive speech. It is through argument, deliberation, and rhetoric that political equals not

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 57.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 227.

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 474b-480.

only communicate and decide what to do, but also reveal themselves – their unique identities – and their understanding of the world they share. This is the arch-Arendtian theme of action as both world- and self-disclosive, a theme which Arendt obviously borrows from Heidegger's conception of human being as essentially *disclosive* or revelatory in nature (the *Da* of *Dasein*).⁸ We should not, however, allow Arendt's strong emphasis on the "revelatory" character of speech and action obscure her essential point. This is that persuasive speech – the kind of speech found in assembly debates, political argument in the marketplace, and constitutional deliberations of all sorts – is the only mode of political action befitting a world of civic equals. As is well-known, her entire conception of political action – elicited in large part from the talkative political world of Periclean Athens – is one that places all forms of violence, coercion, and hierarchy *outside* the sphere of distinctly *political* relations.

Fourth, political speech – understood as the open-ended debate and deliberation of diverse equals – is, "properly speaking," about politics. That is, political speech is (at least implicitly) about the structure of laws and institutions – the constitution, if you will – of a particular public-political world.

The thesis that "the content of politics is politics" strikes us as paradoxical. It is seen by many of Arendt's critics as the *reductio ad absurdum* of her misguided insistence on a "pure" or self-contained conception of action and the public realm. The thesis becomes less paradoxical when we realize that Arendt is talking about the legal and institutional structure that makes the public *and private* freedom of citizens – not to mention their equality – possible in the first place. Political speech is speech about the creation, preservation, and health of this (institutionally-articulated) public world. Of course, "social" concerns are important in their own right. However, at a moment in America when the constitutional structure of *our* public world is under attack by a "unitary Executive branch," such a "narrow" focus on the public-political world is perhaps not entirely misplaced.

Fifth and finally, political action thus understood – as the speech and action of diverse equals, taking place in a constitutionally articulated public realm, and concerning the health and care of this very "space of freedom" – is subject to what Arendt (in *The Human Condition*) calls a pervasive *frailty*. The basic fact of human plurality suffuses the political world entirely. As political actors, we "always moves among and in relation to other acting

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), section 43.

beings." Hence the political actor is, as Arendt reminds us, "never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer." Indeed, "to do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin."⁹

This dual quality of political action flows from what Arendt calls its "boundlessness." Any given action in the public sphere generates unlimited consequences, if only because it acts into a medium "where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes."¹⁰ Hence, in the public realm, "one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation." This *boundlessness* of political action is one reason why action rarely, if ever, achieves its goal. Arendt refers to this dimension of action as its apparent *futility*. Finally, the "boundlessness" of action – itself a function of action's occurrence in a context of a plurality – yields an inherent unpredictability of outcome. We can never know in advance what action – with its ability to "change every constellation" and create potentially "boundless" consequences – is going to result in.

Taken together, the futility, boundlessness and uncertainty of outcome that characterize action make it appear one of the most vulnerable, if not ephemeral, of all human activities. Indeed, it was precisely because of this vulnerability and ephemerality – and the apparent lack of moral responsibility they generated – that philosophers from the time of Plato and Aristotle on down have "re-coded" political action, substituting *making* or *fabrication* for a form of activity originally grounded in the human condition of plurality. By treating *praxis* as a form of *poesis*, and the political actor as more like a solitary craftsman than an agent interacting with other agents, the Western philosophical tradition has succeeded in eliminating many of the various "calamities" of action. As Arendt puts it in a supremely important passage from *The Human Condition*:

It has always been a great temptation, for men of action no less than for men of thought, to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents. The remarkable monotony of the proposed solutions throughout our recorded history testify to the elemental simplicity of the matter. Generally speaking, they always amount to seeking shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end. This attempt to replace action with making is manifest in the whole body of argument against "democracy," which,

⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 190.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the more consistently and better reasoned it is, will turn into an argument against the essentials of politics.¹¹

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt is quite emphatic about the importance of what she calls "the traditional substitution of making for acting," even titling a central section (number 31) after it. And, as the last line of the passage cited above demonstrates, she is equally emphatic about the profound and anti-democratic consequences that such a rebellion against the "human condition of plurality" entails. For the "calamities of action" – "the unpredictability of its outcome, the irreversibility of its process, and the anonymity of its authors" – all arise from "the human condition of plurality, which is the *sine qua non* for the space of appearance which is the public realm." Hence, Arendt concludes, "the attempt to do away with this plurality is *always tantamount to the abolition of the public realm itself*."¹²

In Arendt's telling, it is Plato who initiates the traditional and long-lived "substitution of making for acting." Seeing in fabrication an activity in which the beginner remains the master of the process he has initiated, Plato (according to Arendt) was the first to draw a systematic analogy between the specialized knowledge of the craftsman and the political wisdom of the statesman or ruler. Like the craftsman, the wise or moral ruler "knows" what he wants to accomplish – what ideals he wants to give concrete reality to – before any action takes place. Plato's entire theory of transcendent ideas, as well as his allegory of the cave, is nothing less than the attempt to draw out this analogy between the political actor and the fabricator who first "sees" his product as an ideal or blueprint, and then sets about to concretely actualize it.¹³

As Plato realized, within the schema of fabrication, *knowledge* is quite distinct from the activity of *execution*. Whereas democratic citizens in Periclean Athens exemplified (in their "amateur," non-specialist way) a unity of thought and action, the Platonic-philosophical conceptualization presupposed a radical separation – and hierarchical ranking – of these two faculties. The Platonic ruler monopolized political and moral knowledge (in the form of science or *episteme*). *Knowing* and *doing* became two separate things, the latter reduced to the merely "instrumental" effectuation of what the former spelled out. Every subsequent attempt to postulate a relation of deduction or derivation of "practice" or action from a theoretically determined ("scientific") discourse of Truth or Justice reiterates, in effect, the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 225-226.

basic Platonic schema-and with it, the "traditional substitution of making for acting."

It is for this reason that Arendt can claim that the "substitution of making for acting" characterized not just ancient philosophy, but modern as well. And this led her to make an even more general claim: namely, that the desire to overcome the "frailty" of human affairs and avoid the "calamities of action" is philosophically so strong that "the greater part of political philosophy since Plato could easily be interpreted as various attempts *to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics altogether.*"¹⁴

It is in this claim – with its more or less explicit indictment of the "inauthenticity" of political philosophy since Plato – that we encounter Arendt's most radical and suggestive appropriation of Heidegger's "deconstructive" approach to the tradition.

Like Heidegger, Arendt thought that traditional philosophy had projected an alien metaphysics onto a sphere of life that is (in some sense) the unique locus of an "authentic" *Existenz* (or a distinctly human life). For Heidegger, this sphere was the individual's care for his own being, a dimension of existence that needed to be radically distinguished from the preoccupation and "concernful absorption" of everyday life. For Arendt, this sphere was the public realm, a realm of freedom in which the automatism of everyday life (biological and economic reproduction) was overcome and "transcendence" – in the worldly form of a spontaneous action with others – was achieved. In this regard, one can see Arendt as, in effect, "spatializing" the central distinction of *Being and Time*, locating man's distinctly human freedom in the public realm, i.e., over against both the social sphere of everyday activity and the private realm of "care for the self."

Traditional philosophy, on the other hand, refused to acknowledge the "groundless" freedom of either individual *Existenz* or acting with others. It preferred, instead, to install a set of evidently secure metaphysical standards (or "first principles") in order to guide both individual conduct and political life. It saw political action not as something with inherent value but – at best – as a mere means by which to realize "an allegedly higher good."¹⁵ In this sense, philosophy – understood as metaphysics or the "science of grounds" – turns its back on the non-sovereign character of human freedom, preferring instead to chase after images – not to say fantasies – of mastery and control. Arendt, in other words, takes Heidegger's basic theme – the tradition's substitution of a "grounded" mastery of being for

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 229.

a ground-less existential freedom – and applies it to the Western canon of political philosophy. In so doing, she reveals a persistent effacement of action, plurality, and the non-sovereign freedom of the public-political realm. As she put it a central passage from her essay "What Is Freedom?":

Within the conceptual framework of traditional philosophy, it is indeed very difficult to understand how freedom and non-sovereignty can exist together, or, to put it another way, how freedom could have been given to men under the condition of non-sovereignty. Actually it is as unrealistic to deny freedom because of the fact of human non-sovereignty as it is dangerous to believe the one can be free – as an individual or as a group – only if he is sovereign....Under human conditions, which are determined by the fact that not man but men live on the earth, freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously....If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.¹⁶

Now, one may allow that Arendt is onto something here, but still object that she has grossly overstated her case. To be sure, Plato and a certain "anti-political" strand of the Western philosophical tradition wanted to escape from the vagaries of the public realm and the uncertainties born of human plurality. They clearly prefer the image of the craftsman/sovereign, in complete control of the political world and the shaping of his subjects' character. But the tradition *as a whole*, from "Plato to Marx"? How can she possibly make such a claim?

Here we have to acknowledge that Arendt, under the sway of Nietzsche and Heidegger's metanarratives of Western philosophy, succumbed to the idea that philosophy *is* Platonism. Whitehead's famous one-liner – "All philosophy is a footnote to Plato" – aside, it is hardly clear that Western tradition of political philosophy can be so easily reduced. Plato may well have been extraordinarily influential in shaping that tradition, but there are clearly resources within it – beginning with Aristotle, as Arendt certainly knew – for thinking politics and plurality at least partially together.

Yet despite a certain one-dimensionalization, Arendt's Heidegger-inspired reading of the tradition is, I think, for the most part on target. Even professors of political theory who love the canon (such as myself) have to admit that the bulk of the tradition – like the bulk of

¹⁶ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, pp. 164-165.

European culture prior to the French Revolution – is explicitly anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian. Over and over again, it has embraced not only hierarchy, but the rationalist chimera of one set of correct answers to man's most enduring moral and political problems – a habit of mind that makes it inherently *monist* rather than pluralist. As a result, it has habitually devalued the public realm and the exchange of opinion, equating this sphere and this activity with ignorance, relativism, and moral irresponsibility.

This is obviously the case with Plato. The basic tendency, however, is also clearly manifest in Augustine, Hobbes, Hegel, and Marx. They all have little use for human plurality or a "doxastic" (opinion-based) rationality. The thinkers who opt out of this "scientific" (or faith-based) devaluation of plurality and the public sphere – one thinks of Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Mill – are generally either not philosophers, or are more concerned with private rather than public liberty. Nor should we be surprised that even such "non-philosophical" thinkers as Max Weber see political action as essentially *strategic* in character, just as they see political *power* entirely in light of the "sovereign" model (namely, as the ability to "enforce one's will" upon another). The debate, deliberation, and judgment of equal citizens in the public realm has little if any place in their thought. This is also the case with respect to the civic republican tradition, a tradition well-known for its assertion of the importance of public liberty, but equally well-known for its insistence that a freedom-loving citizen body must be united, militarily and morally.

In the Western tradition, then, political liberty and the public realm suffer a peculiar fate. They are either bracketed in favor of a ruler who monopolizes action and judgment (the case of Plato and Hobbes); or they are repudiated as "pagan" values (as in Augustine and Christianity's polemic against Roman "worldliness").¹⁷ Alternatively, political freedom and the public realm are demoted to a second rank status (as in Constant, Mill and liberalism generally); or they are asserted as *positive* values, but made contingent upon the curbing of human plurality in favor of a united, strong, and morally homogeneous citizen body (Machiavelli and Rousseau).

Marxism hardly escapes this traditional and deeply set tendency to devalue plurality and the public realm. Not only did Marx absorb the category of *praxis* or human interaction in his concept of labor. He also thought that the transcendence of class divisions (brought

¹⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh *et al.* (New York: Image Books, 1958), pp. 110-114; 308-311; 321-322; 437-471.

about by the overthrow of capitalism and the rule of the bourgeoisie) would issue in the spontaneous emergence of a clear and palpable "general interest" of society as a whole. The entire domain of the political could then be reduced to the "administration of things" performable "by any cook." As Albrecht Wellmer has rightly observed, in Marx and the Marxian tradition generally, there is little if any concern with the problem of the institutionalization of freedom.¹⁸

III. Heidegger's Entrapment in Productionist Metaphysics

Plurality, then, does not do well by the tradition, no matter which segment of it we care to examine. The image of a sovereign will, of a singular moral truth, or of a morally homogenous "people" loom far too large in our tradition for this all-important dimension of political life to be given its due. Margaret Canovan is thus absolutely correct to single out the "emphasis on the plurality of human beings and the political space between them" as "the most distinctive feature of Arendt's political thought."¹⁹

This emphasis is not only distinctive; it is revolutionary and far-reaching in its implications. As Arendt reminds us, the public realm, phenomenologically construed, does *not* know the distinction between rulers and ruled. Nor does it know any "collective subjects" such as a "sovereign" people, the *Volk*, or the proletariat. As plural (individual) citizens, we are brought together by what lies between us – an institutionally articulated public realm. This realm "relates and separates" us, as a table does those who sit around it. This relation and separation makes the formation of opinions possible, and opinions – the stuff of the talkative politics Arendt celebrates – are held by *individuals*, not groups or collective subjects.²⁰

The extraordinary salience of plurality in Arendt's thought raises an immediate question. If this notion distinguishes her from an overly "Platonic" tradition of political philosophy in general, does it not also distinguish her from her teacher, Heidegger, in particular?

¹⁸ Albrecht Wellmer, "Reason, Utopia, and the Dialectic of Enlightenment" in *Habermas and Modernity*, edited by Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985)

¹⁹ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 205.

²⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 227.

The answer to this question is most assuredly "yes." For while Heidegger was quite aware of the importance of the distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis*, drawing attention to the "productionist" character of ancient Greek ontology as far back as his Marburg lectures of 1927, his notion of authentic *existenz* was surprisingly devoid of a robust interactive dimension (his identification of *Mitsein* as a structural characteristic of human existence notwithstanding). If, as Jacques Taminiaux has suggested, Heidegger's notion of authentic vs. inauthentic *existenz* was based on the reappropriation of Aristotle's distinction, it is a reappropriation which washes out the importance of human plurality and interaction – what Arendt calls "the sharing of words and deeds."²¹ The largely individualist character of authentic *Dasein* we find in Div. II of *Being and Time* (at odds, in certain respects, with the relational and anti-Cartesian ontology of Div. I) is reproduced in the "authentic" community that emerges in Ch. V ("Temporality and Historicity"). The image of a unitary people taking on the role of an authentic self reappears in the notorious *Rektoratsrede* (1933) and again in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935).²²

In these texts, Heidegger emerges as an increasingly *Völkisch* thinker who attributes to the state an essentially speculative function, namely, "clearing" a space within which the unique destiny of a particular historical people can come to light. The "world" of an historical people is manifest in its political organization. Its laws, customs, and institutions do not simply articulate a *public* world. They trace an *ontological horizon* for the culture as a whole. Thus, the political association is a "space of disclosure" for Heidegger (as it is for Arendt), but a "space of disclosure" in the most fundamental ("primordial") sense possible. A formulation taken from Heidegger's 1942 seminar on Parmenides brings this speculative-ontological function of the political association into sharp focus:

What is the *polis*? *Polis* is the *polos*, the pivot, the place around which gravitates, in its specific manner, everything that for the Greeks is disclosed amidst beings. As this location, the pivot lets beings appear in their Being subject to the totality of their involvement. The pivot neither makes nor creates beings in their Being, but as the pivot, it is the site of the unconcealedness of beings as a whole. Between *polis* and Being, a relation of the same origin rules.²³

²¹ Jacques Taminiaux, *Heidegger and the Project of Fundamental Ontology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 126.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 133-136.

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 95-96.

This conception relates back to the idea of the *polis* as an example of what Heidegger (in "The Origin of the Work of Art" [1936]) calls the "setting-into-work-of-truth." A genuine work of art neither represents nor expresses; rather, it "opens" the "world of an historical people." As Heidegger puts it: "To be a work means to set up a world."²⁴

The *polis*, then, is a unique, indeed privileged, instance of such a "world-disclosing" artwork. As such, it is made possible not by the interaction – the *praxis* – of citizens within an institutional-legal context of civic equality. Rather, it is the most fundamental and uncanny instance of *poiesis* imaginable. The *polis* is the work of a "creator" who engages in a *polemos* or conflict with the dark background of nature and myth, struggling to create a human world – a space of disclosure – amidst the surrounding darkness, which Heidegger calls "earth." The original agon is not between equal but competitive citizens (Arendt's "aristocratic" or Greek conception in *The Human Condition*). Rather, it is between "world" and "earth" as such, between "concealedness" and "unconcealedness." "It is this conflict," Heidegger writes in 1935, that

...first projects and develops what had hitherto been unheard of, unsaid, and unthought. The battle is then sustained by the creators, poets, thinkers, statesmen. Against the overwhelming chaos they set the barrier of their work, and in their work they capture the world thus opened up. It is with these works that the elemental power, *physis*, first comes to stand. Only now does the essent become essent as such. This world-building is history in the authentic sense.²⁵

Such "world-revealing" or "world-building" *poiesis* can take many forms. It can occur in the words of a thinker, a poet, a priest or a playwright. But, as already indicated, it is the city's founder – the "lonely" figure who brings forth a political world in the form of a new *polis* – who is most important. For the *polis* is "the historical place, the there *in* which, *out* of which, and *for* which history happens." Such a radical or foundational beginning can occur, Heidegger states, only if there are "violent men" willing to "use power, to become pre-eminent in historical being as creators, as men of action." Such men – founders such as Sophocles'

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 44.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 62.

Theseus – are, strictly speaking, *apolis*, "without city and place, lonely, strange, and alien..."²⁶

I cite these passages because they reveal how Heidegger, his thematization of the "productionist" prejudices of Greek ontology notwithstanding, himself succumbed to the lure of *poiesis* (albeit in a "radicalized" form). Plurality and equality are effaced, as the "poetic" founder-legislator performs his lonely, quasi-divine work. Using Sophocles as his departure point (specifically, an interpretation of the first choral ode from *Antigone*) Heidegger comes to a "conclusion" surprisingly reminiscent of Machiavelli and Rousseau. Everything, it turns out, depends on the availability of a singular founder-legislator. Without him, no *polis* or republic can come into being and grow into a "world" of its own.

Nothing could be further from the Arendtian conception of a constitutional founding than this emphasis of the "lonely, strange, and alien" man of creative, radically poetic, violence. In *On Revolution* Arendt takes enormous pains to separate the *violence* that accompanies *liberation* from oppression (on the one hand) from the debate, deliberation, and argument that precedes the constitutional creation of a new (legally and institutionally articulated) "space of freedom." Hence the paradigmatic stature of the American Founders for her; hence her approving citation of their debates at the constitutional convention in Philadelphia as exemplary instances of political speech. Plurality and equality, in other words, attend even the *ur*-political moment of foundation. This is a remarkable "deviation" not only from Heidegger, but also from the French and Marxian revolutionary traditions (with their emphasis on the *violence* of the beginning), and from the Western tradition of political thought as a whole (where the myth of the "founding legislator" looms very large indeed).

Since *plurality* marks not just the *preservation* of a new "space of freedom" but its very founding as well, are we not safe to claim it as Arendt's "master idea"?

In answering this question, part of me wants to go along with Canovan. Seen in the context of the tradition, to say nothing of existential philosophy, Arendt is indeed the champion of human plurality, just as she is a champion of the dignity of the political life as such. That said, however, we have to note that there are important *limits* to Arendt's concept of plurality, limits that tie her back to the tradition she struggled so hard to both appropriate and overcome.

Here it is helpful to be reminded of the "perspectival" effects of human plurality in a public sphere that *has not been* reduced to the spectacle of an authoritarian regime, nor to the

²⁶ Ibid.

privatism of a consumerist one. In *The Human Condition* Arendt writes:

...the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life, compared to which even the richest and most satisfying family life can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one's own position with its attending aspects and perspectives...Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.²⁷

Now, this passage evidently provides us with a way of conceiving that "community without unity" which has been the elusive lodestar of so many contemporary champions of "difference." However, Arendt's perspectival, quasi-Nietzschean formulation depends on two things. First, as already indicated, it presupposes a shared world—a "human artifice," a public-political world that is legally and institutionally articulated. Second – and more problematically – it presumes the presence of a substantial degree of public-spiritedness. Only the latter guarantees that our different perspectives on the common world will be worthy of the title "opinion" (in Arendt's individualist sense). Without it, the potential actualization of a rich politics of debate, deliberation, and opinion aborts, issuing in the vastly more familiar politics of divergent interests and identities.

It is possible to chastise Arendt for wanting a *plurality-based* politics while eschewing what liberals commonly refer to as *pluralism*: the pluralism of interests and group identities. This is a "realist" objection that any robustly republican idea of politics (and Arendt's is certainly that) must contend with. But I want to take the *plurality/pluralism* distinction one step farther and suggest that the real problem with Arendt is not that she asks us to bracket (at least partially) our economic and group interests when we attend to the public-political world. This, I think, is something every reasonably good citizen tries to do, partly in horrified response to the exploitative/strategic approach to the public realm that currently reigns supreme in our

²⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 57.

cynically "pluralist" democracy.

No, the deeper problem has to do with a political formulation of plurality that leaves little to no room for the recognition of genuine (and deep-seated) *moral* pluralism. Arendt hardly yearns for a world in which our self-conception as political beings *overcomes* the distinction between *homme* and *citoyen* (the Marxian fantasy of a "human emancipation" from all the differences that divide us). But she does want a world in which strong citizenship, and the "free *moeurs*" that sustain it (Tocqueville), have a clear and distinct moral priority. "Care for the world," not for our souls, should be the dominant passion.

This is a perfectly plausible moral stance to take. However, it is not only at odds with the rampant materialism of our world. It is also at odds with what many take to be their ultimate and most sustaining moral commitments. To put the point in Aristotelian terms: "Care for the public world" (as Arendt intends the phrase) presupposes a vision of the good life, and an attachment to *public* freedom, that few in our increasingly religious (and increasingly privatized) culture can be said to share. Citizenship has lost its luster, and there is little we can do to restore it. So long as Arendt's vision of a diverse public world restricts the expression of "plurality" to those sharing a strong civic and constitutional commitment to "the public thing" – so long as it fails to address the fragmentary and divided character of *our* public world, the depth of moral disagreement and the divergence of its various "tables of value" within it – there will be clear limits to its applicability to our contemporary "dark times."

