

# Hannah Arendt and Her Turn From Political Journalist To Political Philosopher

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Writing a master's thesis, or any academic work for that matter, is a daunting task. It is a necessarily rigorous, demanding mental effort that spans months of one's life. With over a dozen years of experience as a journalist, I felt prepared for the researching and writing component of such a project. But appropriately, the main challenge I have faced is to think what I am doing, as per Hannah Arendt's demand of people in the *Human Condition*.<sup>1</sup> To be more specific, while the academic writing process inherently demands of one to think what they are doing, I have repeatedly faced a roadblock that is a remnant of my professional experience. This roadblock occurs as I shift from the practice-oriented world of journalism to theory-based- academia. As I have perceived it, this difficulty represents a conflict (or at least different categories of thought) between thought and action; theory and practice; between ideals and reality.

These conflicts are also evident in the political realm of human affairs, In this thesis, I will explore the natural tension that exists between philosophy and politics; theory and practice, and thought and action, especially as manifest in contemporary society. In order to investigate this tension, I will use a lens presented by Hannah Arendt and her writings, in particular the *Human Condition* and the *Jewish Writings*<sup>2</sup>. I will use these works to illustrate Arendt's own conflict between the role of politics and philosophy in human affairs as experienced in her transition from a political journalist to a political theorist. I will argue that a comparison of these works shows Arendt's struggle with the tension between philosophy and politics; thought and action, and theory and practice. A comparison of these works also illustrates Arendt's paradoxical conclusion of the *Human Condition*: that in times of unprecedented crisis, although theory and

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.

philosophy are precisely what are necessary to prevent further destruction and tragedy, they unfortunately become superfluous, and then immediate (even if groundless) action becomes necessarily the only human capacity that can “save” the world.

This contention will be fleshed out by examining the contrasts, similarities and apparent contradictions between Arendt’s statements in the *Jewish Writings* and the *Human Condition*. In studying these two very different works, I argue that Arendt’s progression of thought illustrates the paradox of human political relations: that theory and philosophy can be dangerous, dehumanizing elements that can degrade spontaneous action, yet they become absolutely necessary in modern politics to save humanity from descending into barbarism. In particular, I will address Arendt’s turn to philosophy as exhibited by her concept of natality as that which can save us from ourselves by allowing us to forever begin anew with thoughtful action.

This thesis will proceed first with a brief prologue outlining my own experiences and reflections on politics and philosophy that were formed during my time as a political journalist and writer. Then, a review of the relevant literature will be provided, with a focus on natality and Arendt’s political philosophy as it appears in the *Human Condition*. A synopsis of the *Jewish Writings* will follow in order to illustrate Arendt’s career as a political journalist, which includes the observations and philosophical musings that lead to her turn to political philosophy in the *Human Condition*. The next component will then be a synopsis of this political philosophy as it appears in the *Human Condition*. I conclude by analyzing the significance of Arendt’s transition from a political journalist to a political philosopher.

## MY TURN FROM POLITICAL JOURNALISM TO THEORY

As a journalist, I observed and analyzed people in action, practicing politics. Thoughtful action, unfortunately, appeared to be relegated by politicians to a second-tier luxury activity. As a student of political philosophy, I would characterize this as a retreat from reality to the ivory tower, in which politics is theoretical and practice, or action, is secondary.

A parallel to political action in my own profession is evident, since as a journalist, I learned an action-based skill set aimed at detecting and reporting news. The fast pace and insistence on simplicity discouraged any sort of theoretical questioning of journalism or political matters. As a result, I entered the workforce well-trained to provide a service, however, I lacked the tools necessary to pursue questions that relate to politics, such as justice, fortune and authority. So with this background, I reported on politics and business for over a decade at a relatively superficial level. I also spent a short time as a political writer for a federal party during a Canadian election, during which I wrote rhetorical and promotional material.

As a journalist, business and politics were my “beats,” but I quickly concluded that these categorical names are merely an inconsequential attempt to civilize what are, more often than not, uncivilized behaviors amongst people vying for power. To further compound what quickly became apparent to me (the pervasive and dissatisfying lack of thinking) my method of political reporting was practice-based and did not require much theoretical knowledge. Despite, or perhaps because of, the dearth of thinking, theoretical questions began to present themselves in my mind, and I began to write longer, analytical

pieces to this effect. For the most part, these types of pieces are generally not suitable for most newspapers, where space is at a premium. I was encouraged to keep producing shorter, factual stories. The questions I had been raising during editorial meetings in which we discussed story ideas, and in interviews with politicians, were not being addressed. Perhaps it was a function of time (journalistic deadlines), or perhaps a lack of interest amongst a pragmatic group of people constantly trying to douse political fires (politicians). Whatever the reason, I became frustrated and disillusioned.

As a result, I concluded that, despite my preconceived, idealistic hopes to the contrary, reporting on the activities of businesspeople and politicians required no more depth of thought than covering a police beat or the activities of regular, everyday people. In my mind, then, of more importance than the categories we create to understand human interaction (politics or business), are the ways we interact with one another, and how we forge ahead in a confusing and chaotic world. Despite this conclusion, the modern paradigm about politicians and businesspeople is that they operate with virtuous principles they have assembled after much thought and education. Unfortunately, I concluded this to be untrue, at least if I judge by the criteria of actions and conversations.

In addition to this conclusion, as a young, inexperienced and idealistic journalist, I quickly learned some other fundamental truths about human nature. These truths became apparent in contrast to my preconceived notions of politicians as powerful, idealistic and optimistic individuals seeking to achieve a set of goals. As for businesspeople, I concluded that political ideals are interchangeable with the drive to succeed and the consequence of accumulated wealth. Thus, after more than a decade reporting on politics and business, there are several things I observed as consistent human behavior. While not

groundbreaking, my observations are relevant in terms of my return to academia. These rudimentary “truths” about human beings engaged in political action are as follows: First: most people begin with intentions that could be considered honorable or good, at least in regards to trying to improve the human condition. Their aims rarely consist of a naked power grab, as one might think, but the power and influence become ends in themselves, rather than means. Second: obtaining and retaining political or financial power requires people to compromise themselves and the ideals they might strive for. The constitution of each individual dictates how much they are willing to compromise. Third: and this is where my mental roadblock finds its source, people engaged in political activity rarely show any signs of having preceded action with deep thought.

There were very few instances in which politicians overtly exhibited any trace of substantial political thought or theoretical questioning. There are several easily identifiable explanations, at first glance. This phenomenon is explainable in part by the outsider status to which reporters are relegated. Reporters are rarely, if ever, granted access to the halls in which the inner-workings of politicians and their parties occur. And it should also be granted that most, if not all, political parties and individual politicians have some semblance of a manifesto or an ideal they hold in their mind. But despite these potential explanations for the lack of thought I witnessed, more often than not, when I interviewed politicians, whether individually or in a “scrum”, they immediately resorted to language that was rhetorical, superficial, pre-approved, cliché-ridden, or the maddeningly empty language of a bureaucrat.

While one can definitely state that this is due to the confrontational and distrustful nature of the relationship between journalist and politician, I observed their empty

language everywhere, not just in conversation with reporters. This has led me to suspect that in the reality of the daily turnings of political machinery, theorizing or striving for ideals is a time-consuming luxury. In order to avoid complete cynicism, I would prefer to think that this idealistic, theoretical stage of forming one's political position occurs long before one enters the arena and realizes the necessity of pragmatism. Perhaps this is why theorizing is mainly restricted to production by think tanks and academia, after which it is disseminated, refined and distilled for popular consumption.

If a politician does hold theoretical ideals, these ideals are almost inherently relegated to secondary status in terms of guiding their actions. This is because in order to practice politics, one must first be elected to office. To do this successfully, (in a Western, democratic society) a politician must please a majority of a plurality of people. Thus, any ideals one sets for oneself likely become watered down, pastel versions of the colorful ideals originally presented to the electorate. Alternatively, a politician then becomes bogged down in the sodden weeds of serving constituents. In reality, this politician finds that their actions must be instinctual and survival-oriented, as opposed to actions taken after slow, patient consideration as to whether or not they correspond with one's theoretical ideal. So in order to please constituents and keep their job, the actions of a politician must be focused on the minutia of a transportation bill, or he or she must compromise an ideal to help a local businessman secure a building permit and thus secure another vote. Consideration and discussion of fundamental ideas or "big picture" projects then are no longer a priority.

This admittedly cynical point of view was shaped not only when I was a journalist, but when I wrote for clients who ranged from political parties to



businesspeople wishing to market a new strategy or product. My time as a political writer was during a federal election. The election period in Canada is, by law, restricted to roughly one month. This creates an extremely fast-paced, urgent environment. Needless to say, as a writer, I was called upon to create a specific type of product: one that cast the politicians and their party in the most flattering and compelling light. An observer might call it propaganda. Whatever its name, I was asked to manipulate the truth.

As a reporter, who aims at relaying the truth with as little bias as possible, this activity was distasteful to me. Many of my tasks involved massaging words to create a flattering version of the truth that may or may not have reflected the reality of the situation. This prompted major doubt as to the integrity of politicians and the existence of any ideals or underlying theories or commitment to truth that guided their practice. Needless to say, these experiences had already colored my perception of the world when I began my university career as a political theory student. As a result, I began with this roadblock already erected: action trumps thought; politics trumped philosophy and pragmatism outweighed idealism.

#### *HUMAN CONDITION AS MIDDLE GROUND*

My first encounter with Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition*, presented to me a unique blend, or a middle ground, of these schisms. It is a blend that seems to me to be rare amongst both philosophers and politicians. This daring breach of boundaries represents what Arendt is perhaps most renowned for: she called on people to think what they are doing with a fresh approach that is untainted neither by tradition nor authority. Indeed, she famously urged people to not only think what they are doing, but "think without banisters."

It is curious that Arendt arrived at this approach given her renouncement of the intellectual world in the 1930s<sup>3</sup>. In addition, Arendt blamed the crisis of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century on the transformation of philosophy to ideology.<sup>4</sup> The question, then, is on what grounds did she propose a new philosophy of politics? The recently published *Jewish Writings* provides a clue that Arendt's response to the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was indeed not philosophical. But this contention is suspect given her extensive experiences with some of the most influential philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, such as Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. Indeed, there is evidence of a political philosophy in the *Jewish Writings*.

The *Jewish Writings* is a collection of journalistic essays that span the 1930s to the 1960s. Stylistically, this book is mainly factual and historically oriented, but Arendt managed to incorporate many philosophical musings and political urgings. As a result, the *Jewish Writings* is an exposition of Arendt's ideals and convictions gleaned from decades as an observer and sometime participant in political affairs that related to Zionism and the Holocaust. Prior to turning to the *Jewish Writings*, however, I will proceed with a review of the literature on Arendt's work, in combination with her own words in terms of her intentions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to understand Hannah Arendt's commentary on philosophy and politics, many people situate her best known writings- the *Human Condition*, *On Totalitarianism*

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt. "The Political Organization of the Jewish People" in *Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Book, .2007, 240.

<sup>4</sup> In the *Promise of Politics*, in which Arendt exhibits disdain for philosophy as ideology-or at the very least, an attempt at literally implementing an ideal. She writes: "No critique can demolish an ideology more utterly than its complete enactment. In the fullness of its flowering, the ideology reaches such an apex of absurdity that its credibility sinks to nothing. Precisely when it presents itself most purely, untroubled by any historical fact or any ideal truth out of which it once emerged, just then the ground crumbles from beneath its feet, because it has continued to interpret itself on its own authority alone. (Hannah Arendt. *The Promise of Politics*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005, 227.

and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*- as central. While one would not be mistaken in doing so, a consideration of her entire oeuvre is not only necessary, but more enriching. The recent release of two books, the *Promise of Politics* and the *Jewish Writings*, make a complete consideration even more essential.

However, even with such a tactic, many Arendtians still remain puzzled as to what she was trying to do in her writings. One stream of thought argues that Arendt's personal circumstances provide a valuable clue in that they are served as an indelible influence on her point of view. As an exiled German Jewess, Arendt had firsthand experience of politics at its worst. It is undeniable that her biographical status influenced her point of view and her writings, and while this approach addresses the psychological aspect of the manner in which one's worldview is shaped, in Arendt's case it appears especially salient.

#### POLITICS OF THE EXTRAORDINARY

But before addressing Arendt's own history and work, it is useful to provide a framework that looks beyond individual thinkers. This step back is necessary because Arendt was writing during a time of unprecedented events that altered the way people regarded politics and human relations. With this in mind, Andreas Kalyvas provides a helpful framework in his book *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, which compares the theories of Arendt, Carl Schmitt and Max Weber. Kalyvas tackles Arendt's work by first setting the context as that of massive political ruptures in society, such as revolutions. Kalyvas argues that this approach can lead to insights that would otherwise be unavailable if one is to restrict political studies to "normal" political relations.

Kalyvas' theory of the extraordinary relates to democratic politics and the

ruptures and subsequent institutional and societal changes. This atmosphere creates “democratic new beginnings” which in turn leads to a “moment of legitimacy” and the opportunity for the type of “political freedom” Arendt identified that encourages human beings to engage in politics.<sup>5</sup>

Kalyvas identifies another type of extraordinary political behavior which can lead to a positive outcome: spontaneous and extraneous collective actions, much like those Arendt favored (such as the Warsaw Ghetto uprising<sup>6</sup>). These extraordinary occurrences can also open up new forms of political action. In short, Kalyvas’ theory allows an alternative means of analyzing political action since it looks beyond quotidian human action, which in turn illuminates a broadened spectrum of possibilities. As Kalyvas says, “...a systematic theory of the extraordinary could also indicate ways of re-conceptualizing radical democracy without falling into the trap of a one-dimensional model that reduces popular sovereignty to a constant mobilization and permanent participation, making it virtually unrealistic under modern conditions.”<sup>7</sup>

In order to understand Arendt’s intentions in her approach to politics and philosophy, it is perhaps most logical to turn to her own words that appear in a 1953 reply to Professor Eric Voegelin’s critique of her work, *Origins of Totalitarianism*.<sup>89</sup> It is worth quoting Arendt at length.

“Thus my first problem was how to write historically about something-totalitarianism-which I did not want to conserve but, on the contrary, felt engaged to destroy. My way of solving this problem has given rise to the

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<sup>5</sup> Andreas Kalyvas. *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008 P. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt, (2007), 215.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt.. “A Reply to Eric Voegelin,” in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*. Ed Jerome Kohn. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company. 1994. P. 401-403.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Meridien Books- World Publisher, 1955, 193.

reproach that the book was lacking in unity. What I did- and what I might have done anyway because of my previous training and the way of my thinking- was to discover the chief elements of totalitarianism and analyze them in historical terms, tracing these elements back in history as far as I deemed proper and necessary. That is, I did not write a history of totalitarianism, but an analysis in terms of history; I did not write a history of anti-Semitism or of imperialism, but analyzed the element of Jew-hatred and the element of expansion insofar as these elements were still clearly visible and played a decisive role in the totalitarian phenomenon itself. The book, therefore, does not really deal with the “origins” of totalitarianism-as its title unfortunately claims-but gives a historical account of the elements which crystallized into totalitarianism; this account is followed by an analysis of the elemental structure of totalitarian movements and domination itself. The elementary structure of totalitarianism is the hidden structure of the book, while its more apparent unity is provided by certain fundamental concepts which run like red threads through the whole.”

Thus, we can see that Arendt explicitly deemed herself first a historical analyst in discussing the totalitarian regime. She was not approaching the phenomenon as a philosopher, nor as a politician, but rather as an analyst, which is arguably a mix of the two in that her conclusions aimed at disseminating useful knowledge to future generations so as to avoid the repetition of such a situation. As Arendt wrote in an essay on Walter Benjamin in *Men in Dark Times*, the historian is a “pearl-diver.”<sup>10</sup> It is the duty of the pearl diver to mine history’s tales for information that could be used, not to prevent horrible occurrences, but to learn enough to be able to recognize and guard against the seeds that could lead to phenomenon such as totalitarianism. We see here her insistence upon action bolstered by thought as that which can preserve the human world.

However, human action is rife with unpredictability, which can include dangerous situations, and Arendt acknowledged this danger in her condemnation of contemporary politics as a failure. She stated this unequivocally: “There are no human institutions and

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt. “Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940”, in *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1955, 193.

revolutions, however radical, that can secure human freedom over the long term.”<sup>11</sup> In the *Jewish Writings*, Arendt discussed this failure in terms of how the Jewish population was treated, and in part blames the political structure that lead to the stateless status of Jews. Specifically, Arendt blamed the politics of competing interests *within* the Jewish state itself, which is also contained within the global structure of nations.

#### REJECTION OF HUMAN NATURE

In another illumination as to her intentions, in addition to a stringent commitment to history as teacher, Arendt did not want to define herself as a philosopher. This was based on a rejection of both a knowable human nature and a previously established or divinely ordained ideal as a guide that could govern society.

For Arendt, the problem with speaking of human nature occurred as a result of the limits of human awareness: we cannot speak with the same confidence of the essence of who we are as a species in the same way as we speak of the stuff that makes up a mushroom or a bird. Thus, human efforts to speak of human nature end with an inaccessible divinity. So through modern science, with its aim to solve everything unknowable, we have created a new Archimedian vantage point from which to regard the world. As Margaret Canovan writes, this new Archimedian point encourages man to want to master his senses and his understanding of the world. This is in contrast to the ancients’ contemplation of nature.<sup>12</sup> As Arendt said, while we can determine the essence of surrounding matter, we cannot do the same for ourselves- this would be like “jumping

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 174.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Canovan. *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*. New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1974, 101.

over our own shadow.”<sup>13</sup>

## BIOGRAPHY

Arendt was certainly not the first to deeply questioning the role of, and relationship between, politics and philosophy. As a German Jew born in 1904, Arendt found herself in the company of influential philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and Carl Schmitt. These thinkers wrote during and after the First and Second World Wars, and understandably, tried to make sense of these horrific events. Amongst this group of contemporaries, the paradigm at that time constituted a direct attack, or at least deep questioning of, traditional politics and human relations.

Seyla Benhabib addresses Arendt’s critique of contemporary politics and modernity in a book entitled *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*.<sup>14</sup> Benhabib employs three lenses with which to examine Arendt’s work: her portrayal of totalitarianism and her reflections on the impact of modernity; her Heideggerian “Existenz Philosophy”, and the undeniable influence of Arendt’s biography as an exiled German Jewess.

## AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

Benhabib suggests that in order to begin to understand Arendt’s project, one must first acknowledge her personal circumstances as an exiled German Jewess. Indeed, Arendt barely escaped the internment camps of Gurs with her husband Heinrich Blucher after receiving emergency visas that allowed them to travel to France<sup>15</sup>. This theory speaks to the theory of politics of the extraordinary: having experienced an extraordinary situation, Arendt underwent unprecedented circumstances, thus leading her to deeply

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<sup>13</sup> Arendt, (1958), 10

<sup>14</sup> Seyla Benhabib. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, (2007), xxii

consider the wider, societal implications. In addition to accounting for Arendt's personal experiences, one must then also "de-center"<sup>16</sup> Arendt's best-known work- *The Human Condition*- as the foundation of her thought, and take into account her other works.

The scope of Arendt's observations was vast, and in keeping with Arendt's rejection of describing herself solely as a philosopher, Benhabib describes additional roles Arendt took on, which included not only political theorist, but social psychologist, historian, journalist and storyteller. Benhabib suggests that Arendt analyzed "human culture and institutions; political parties and movements; individual and collective identities; historical trends and future possibilities."<sup>17</sup>

Margaret Canovan, who wrote the introduction for the *Human Condition*, accounts less for Arendt's personal circumstances. Canovan takes a relatively straightforward approach to Arendt's work, and underpins her analysis with an emphasis on Arendt's urge to think what we are doing. She claims that Arendt's thought is based on a distinctly human but intangible capacity for freedom. Specifically for Canovan, Arendt's freedom is the ability to engage in thoughtful, political action.<sup>18</sup>

The contrast between Benhabib and Canovan and their theories as to how much Arendt's situation addresses the question of personal circumstances: if it does matter, why, and how much? Why is it important to determine what events, and to what extent they that shape a person's outlook, and is this relevant when examining their theories divorced from all other factors? We can return to Kalyvas: Arendt's situation certainly qualifies as extraordinary, thus we extract from her thought possibilities and suggested solutions that would not have otherwise come to fruition. While this can be true in

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<sup>16</sup> Benhabib, (2003), xxv.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>18</sup> Canovan (2006), 76.



general, and not just for philosophers, Arendt was unique in her breach of boundaries between thought and action, theory and practice, or philosophy and politics.

#### THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY

This breach of boundaries raises a question of whether or not theorizing about politics and human behavior can exist in a world divorced from reality. In fact, human relations, or political action aimed at some ideal, cannot exist esoterically, or solely in theory. One can never really step away from the world and live in theory. Theory also fails to recognize the unpredictability (or non-scientific quality) of human behavior. For example, no one predicted the extent of the destruction of the Holocaust, nor the attacks of 9/11. Certainly some individuals have predicted, in general, wars or attacks, but the very nature of human behavior is its spontaneity and creativity.

The danger then, lies in a primary reliance on theory to guide human relations. For if one is always theorizing, one is supposing about the future and how to reach some pre-determined ideal or utopia based on the idea of the good or the beautiful. Therefore, Arendt approached major philosophical questions with caution- those related to freedom, human agency and political ideals. It is important to acknowledge that these questions were situated in the context of Leo Strauss' project.

A superficial account of Strauss' project could state that it was aimed at determining the limits of human capacity for understanding and processing one's surroundings. Strauss sought to answer the question of whether there is a knowable, verifiable truth that is accessible to humans, and if so, whether or not this can be extrapolated to politics. Strauss called this the "theological-political predicament"<sup>19</sup>, or

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<sup>19</sup> Rodrigo Chacon. "Hannah Arendt in Weimar: Beyond the Theological-Political Predicament? New York: New School for Social Research, 2009. P. 1

the question of “norms derived from reason and norms whose source is attributed to divine revelation.” Or, in Strauss’ words: “[T]his, indeed, is the question: whether men can acquire knowledge of the good, without which they cannot guide their lives individually or collectively, by the unaided efforts of their reason, or whether they are dependent for that knowledge on divine revelation.”<sup>20</sup> Strauss’ questions raised the fundamental issue for human affairs: politics or revelation as guidance, and this serves to “remind us of what is at stake in politics—the right or the good life and ultimately happiness...”<sup>21</sup>

#### THE POLITICAL AND THE SOCIAL

One theorist who criticized Arendt’s approach to this question was Hannah Pitkin, who framed it in terms of the “hard-headed realist versus the idealist.”<sup>22</sup> This criticism directly illustrates the tension Arendt explored between philosophy and politics, which became a popular subject of debate in the 1950s.

Pitkin’s critique is helpful in that it addresses Arendt’s characterization of the political, but with an added emphasis on the lives of human beings as being conducted in two distinct spheres: public and private. For Arendt, the political started once human beings breached the private space and engaged in action and speech. This speech and action showed who they are and preserved the space of the public sphere, where freedom can ultimately be maintained. It is at this point that many critics of Arendt find fault: her conception of the political and social are nebulous and not situated in reality, as Pitkin, argued in her book called *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the*

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Pitkin. *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 36.

*Social*.<sup>23</sup>

According to Pitkin, Arendt's characterization of the social undermined the power inherent in people's engagement in the political realm. Pitkin decried Arendt's absolute loss of faith in politics, but more generally, she acknowledged the universal problem of political theory that Arendt ran into.. As Pitkin wrote: "...[T]he political theorist is forever in the paradoxical position of telling people unchangeable truths about what they are doing, in hopes of getting them to change what they are doing." Nevertheless, the unique and powerful contribution Arendt made, Pitkin stated, was her portrayal of political action as an infinite set of unprompted and individually independent moments—the "miracle."<sup>24</sup>

While several thinkers criticize to Arendt's concept of the social, Patricia Bowen-Moore attempted to flesh it out further. Bowen-Moore defines it as "members of a species collected under the conditions of organized mass living together." She regarded the social man in Marxist terms, stating that he is defined by the worldlessness caused by the capitalist, imperialist economy and the privilege it awarded to the private world. This privileging of the private world caused the loss of the common world and the subsequent loss of privacy necessary for people who venture into the public realm.<sup>25</sup>

Stepping beyond the specifics of Arendt's thought, most critics acknowledge her contribution in that she encouraged a new way to think about politics. Arendt's unique contribution can be attributed to the influence of her personal experiences as an exiled, stateless person. Interestingly, despite, or perhaps because of, this experience, Arendt

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 36.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 49.

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Bowen-Moore. *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. 125.

lamented the loss of nobility, and even relevance, of politics. This lament was also colored by her time as a reporter on the Eichmann trial, when she witnessed horrific accounts of the ultimate degradation of politics.

This lament for nobility in politics is the reason many people feel she glorified the ancient regimes of Athens and Sparta. In much of the *Human Condition*, Arendt addressed the idealism of these regimes in rigorous exegeses of Plato and Aristotle. However, it should be noted that her aim, according to Thomas Pangle in his book the *Spirit of Modern Republicanism*, was not to literally recreate a modern version of the ancient regimes. Rather, Arendt was engaged in “creative reconstructionism.” Indeed, Pangle allows that she discounted many of the negative traits associated with the Roman and Greek regimes, such as the exclusionary and violent nature of their polities.<sup>26</sup>

#### ARENDT AND HEIDEGGER’S EXISTENZ PHILOSOPHY

Arendt’s rigorous exegesis of the ancient regimes was encouraged during her graduate school studies with Martin Heidegger, who himself focused extensively on Plato and Aristotle. Arendt’s association with Heidegger, not surprisingly, had a deep influence on her thought. Seyla Benhabib addresses this influence, specifically, of Heidegger’s “Existenz” philosophy. For Arendt, the implications of Heidegger’s Dasein and being-in-the-world meant that human beings exist in the world as a plurality; a group of individuals who experience life solely as one of a group in which their fellow human beings are distinct and equal.<sup>27</sup> Arendt expanded on what she felt was the defining characteristic of Dasein: its “temporality and finitude,” and the anonymity of das man. Arendt felt that man’s ability to speak broke this condition of anonymity and

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Pangle. *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism*. London: The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1988, 52

<sup>27</sup> Benhabib, 53.

temporality.<sup>28</sup>

Arendt had a troubled and complicated relationship with Heidegger for many reasons, including his reported association with the Nazi party and national socialism. Specifically, Arendt addressed her own difficulties with Heidegger and his concept of Dasein in an essay called “What is Existenz Philosophy?” when she wrote that “...it is obvious that concepts of this kind can only lead us out of philosophy and into some kind of nature-oriented superstition. If it does not belong to the concept of man that he inhabits the earth together with others of his kind, then all that remains for him is a mechanical reconciliation by which the atomized Selves are provided with a common ground that is essentially alien to their nature.”<sup>29</sup>

While it is easy to get caught up in Heidegger’s theory, what matters as far as Arendt’s thought is concerned is that she connected the breakdown of social relations (lack of civic, social and political expression and organizations) and alienation of individuals with the seeds of totalitarianism and authoritarianism, Benhabib writes. Arendt attributed Heidegger’s dismissal of the plurality of human beings as that which lead to radical isolation of individuals, and eventually, totalitarianism.<sup>30</sup> As Benhabib explains, the “lack of action as interaction” is the danger.<sup>31</sup> So while Heidegger’s impact was profound, Arendt’s theories ended in a particularly oppositional stance in that natality opposes Heidegger’s “being-unto-death” because its isolation is replaced by plurality and the capacity for speech and action.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Arendt (1958) 178.

<sup>29</sup>Benhabib, 54.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 104.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 71.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid 109-110.

## NATALITY

Patricia Bowen-Moore gives natality a threefold definition. Primarily, it is a biological birth; secondarily, it is “birth into the realm of action;” and thirdly, it is “birth into the realm of timeless thought.”<sup>33</sup> Like Benhabib, Bowen-Moore sees Heidegger’s Dasein- being thrown into the world and towards death, as opposite to Arendt’s natality, and indeed a “long-needed balance to the tradition’s (philosophy’s) apparent prejudice.”

Bowen-Moore explains natality further by saying that the love of the world and shared human experiences lend a “moral rectitude,” despite the amoral qualities of natality and plurality. This explains Arendt’s declaration of political natality as the antithesis of totalitarianism and the loss of individuality, and the subsequent destruction of freedom through terror, Bowen-Moore writes. In practical political terms, citizenship formally preserves human action and plurality in that it guarantees accessibility to the public and common realm, Bowen Moore writes.<sup>34</sup>

## *JEWISH WRITINGS*- INTRODUCTION

The *Jewish Writings* is a collection of essays spanning four decades: the 1930s, 40s, 50s and 60s. During this time, Arendt engaged in different activities, most of them politically oriented and most as an observer and commentator. Her commentary in the *Jewish Writings* is mainly an unabashedly critical attack on contemporary politics, and the associated corruption of ideals. As she wrote in a 1942 essay, the contemporary goals of freedom and justice, with democracy as the means of realizing these goals, were “corrupted and dragged through the mud by an uprooted bohemianism.” This “uprooted” class Arendt referred to is the elite class of the European Jewry, which consisted of

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<sup>33</sup>Bowen-Moore, (1989), 1.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 50.

opportunistic “millionaires and philanthropists” and businessmen. This class, as a result of their failure to recognize the equality of the fight for freedom with the very fight for survival, Arendt wrote, acquired a permanent victimhood status. As a result, the only ideals that could rescue this society- freedom and justice- became “abstract...concepts for feeble old men.”<sup>35</sup>

In even more certain terms, Arendt blamed this degradation on a change in consciousness in society, and partly on the “young” generation (ages 20 to 70). This generation, she said, exhibited an insidious superficiality in that they demanded little more of their politicians than “opportunism stripped of principles, and propaganda but not policies.” As a result, a false sense of trust was built not on the substance of a great man, but on “blood and soil and horoscopes”. This represents the “realpolitik” of this age for Arendt. The horrible outcome, she wrote, is a “despotic” regime in which cliques and clans prevail, individuals are atomized and opportunistic businessmen-turned-politicians denounce family “for the sake of their careers or personal security.”<sup>36</sup> In terms of the political result, Arendt wrote that this power-seeking mentality led to the tragic failure to establish a Jewish Army, which she repeatedly called for as a means to strengthening and protecting the Jewish community.

It follows then, using the established framework for this thesis in which practice and theory are seen as parallel, that we can assume that given her lack of trust in contemporary politics, Arendt saw widespread corruption of both practice (action) and theory. This theory is even more plausible if one keeps in mind her platform in the *Jewish Writings: Aufbau* was a political publication read by many influential thinkers and

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<sup>35</sup>Hannah Arendt “Jewish Politics” in *The Jewish Writings..* New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 241.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

politicians, the very individuals she accused of possessing corrupted ideas and ideals. Witness the writing style in *Aufbau*: overtly polemical and confrontational. Subtlety and nuance, in this case, were overshadowed by strong language and calls to action as she attempted to, at the very least, raise awareness, and ideally, rouse people to action. As Jerome Kohn says in the Preface, these political articles provide a Jewish perspective in which she called for individual Jews to mobilize to action.<sup>37</sup>

Kohn notes, however, that she also demanded thoughtful consideration and conversation prior to action when it came to action in a plurality of people working towards a cause. As he writes, she asked “...individual Jews to join together, not only to form an army, but also to sit down at a table and discuss their differences: not to disown their own opinions but to think about and seriously consider opinions other than their own, and by speaking and listening to their peers rise above their disagreements and participate in the formation of a genuine Jewish plurality.”

It is typical of Arendt to have fervently demanded of her fellow Jews (in this case but any actor in general) action tempered with a caution to think prior to doing so. If one takes a step back, one can see the thread of natality running through this formula of thinking before doing as crucial for human beings living in a troubled world. Arendt defined natality, in part, as the opportunity for thought and action within the present moment. This moment contains the potential for a new beginning,<sup>38</sup> and is available to anyone. Furthermore, natality allows people to participate in the highest activity human beings are capable of: action. The problem for civilization, when extraordinarily evil things can eventually happen, occurs when people do not use the capacity to think first.

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid, xxiii.

<sup>38</sup>Hannah Arendt. *Between Past and Future*. New York: Meridien Book-World Publishing Company, 1965.



Arendt's call to action contains a paradox, however, at least along her line of thought. Action is often spontaneous (indeed, Arendt even endorsed spontaneous political uprisings such as in the Warsaw concentration camp) and frequently unaccompanied by deep thought. But this paradox illustrates the tension between, and fragility of, human affairs. Spontaneous action, fortified by courage, is absolutely necessary for political survival of individuals and groups, even if it is not imbued with an abundance of previous thought. This is a danger of which Arendt spoke: the unpredictability of action and revealing oneself in the public sphere. Nevertheless, action, underpinned with natality, is paramount, despite the peril.

The following analysis of the *Jewish Writings* is divided up into themes: Political conditions; historical conditions; human rights and anti-Semitism; normalization of Jewish politics; political participation, Zionism, and Arendt's political philosophy.

#### POLITICAL CONDITIONS

We can return to Kalyvas' politics of the extraordinary (as outlined in the literature review) to examine the grounds for Arendt's attack on politics. Never before, at least in Arendt's opinion, had the actions (or lack of action) of human beings ever prompted such a wholly evil degradation of humanity. She described the concentration camps as a realized hell earth- as real as "stones and houses and trees"-<sup>39</sup> that created a new type of human being. Ostensibly, this meant a disposable human being; a mere organic creation stripped of dignity and the ability to act, perhaps similar to those living in the mass society she described in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. As she described, "By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between

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<sup>39</sup>Hannah Arendt. "A Way toward the Reconciliation of the People" in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 263.

them... (Totalitarian government) destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.”<sup>40</sup> This realized hell, for Arendt, represented a breach of boundaries; a realization of the human capacity for evil that occurs with an abandonment of thought amongst the inhabitants of the solely human realm.

For Arendt, the radical evil present in the concentration camps represented an extraordinary situation. Kalyvas’ theory can thus shed some light on the capacity of human beings to perpetrate evil upon one another. But in trying to understand, however, it should be noted that the point is not that through the tracing of the origins can one claim to prevent such a phenomenon in the future, but that we can perhaps locate the seminal events and be alert to them should they reoccur. Through this location and acknowledgement of seminal events, thoughtful action can be aimed at remaining conscious of one’s actions and one’s responsibility to fellow human beings, which can shed further light on humanity.

Arendt’s urging to think what we are doing also suggests another aspect of thoughtful action and of the merger between theory and practice. In preceding action with thought, we are breaching a boundary that lies between these two human capacities for self-expression. We also breach another boundary: thought is the internal dialogue with oneself, thus when we act, we cross the boundary into a plurality of human beings in that we are (hopefully) aware that our actions have the potential to be seen and heard by our fellow human beings. It is conceivable that this is what Arendt meant when she urged people to think what they are doing: thoughtful action escorts human beings from an isolated experience to one in which he or she is considering those around him and

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<sup>40</sup>Arendt, (1955), 466

acknowledging the plurality of the human condition. Without this step, society is on precarious footing, with any missteps potentially leading to extraordinary situations such as extreme dehumanization of the concentration camps.

In attempting to understand the events that led to this extraordinary circumstance, Arendt controversially placed part of the responsibility on the Jewish people themselves. In particularly harsh language, Arendt stated that the apathy of the Jews, and their politics aimed solely at survival, over 200 years, nurtured an instinct to escape attention by “playing dead.” As a result, Jews allowed themselves to be ruled by plutocrats and philanthropists, Arendt stated, and their only participation in society consisted of raising money. As Jerome Kohn writes, Arendt believed Jews were merely and “necessarily willing pawns...used by the monarchy, the aristocracy, the liberals and discarded by each of those opposed factions, when their usefulness, which was financial, was either used up or no longer deemed socially desirable.”<sup>41</sup> As a result, political organization was anathema to their existence, and should an enemy approach, the Jewish people planned for future survival at the expense of their current reality.<sup>42</sup> Although it is an uncomfortable exercise, we can attempt to understand why Arendt located part of the blame on Jewish apathy if we look at the way she viewed reason and history in an essay in the *Jewish Writings*.

## HISTORICAL CONDITIONS

First, it is helpful to turn to her words on history in an essay on Walter Benjamin in her work called *Men in Dark Times*. She wrote: “Insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself

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<sup>41</sup>Arendt (2007), xx.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 165.

historically, it becomes tradition.”<sup>43</sup> Further, tradition sorts out the past chronologically and systematically, ie it sifts through events to discriminate positive from negative; orthodox from heretical; obligatory from relevant and interesting opinion from data. According to Arendt, Benjamin’s method of assessing the past required a tabula rasa articulation of the past; an articulation that is free of the judgment attached to tradition to dictate how one understands something. Arendt used the metaphor of a pearl diver, who descends to the muck of the ocean floor, extracts the fruits of the ocean (pearls/thoughts) and returns with a living fragment of the past from which one gleans value for the present day.<sup>44</sup>

Through this lens, Arendt proceeded in the *Jewish Writings* with an examination of Jewish history in Europe. Arendt explained the history of Jews in Europe, including, assimilation or emancipation and Anti-Semitism. She began with the Jewish quest for emancipation upon witnessing the modern Enlightenment project of tolerance- or universal human rights- in contemporary language.

Arendt framed her historical account in a 1930s essay called “The Enlightenment and The Jewish Question” with the question of history versus reason as educator, and drew upon two thinkers who were particularly influential upon this debate: Gotthard Ephraim Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn<sup>45</sup>. For Arendt, the approaches of Mendelssohn and Lessing to history provide valuable- and opposing-tools with which to trace the social place of Jews in Europe in modern history. Lessing’s privileging of reason as a supreme source of truth contrasts with Mendelssohn’s view of history as educator and

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<sup>43</sup>Arendt, (1955), 193.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid, 204.

<sup>45</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 6.

illuminator of mistakes and lessons. Essentially, these two thinkers represent the debate surrounding human access to “truth”, which is the debate between reason and revelation. And while Mendelssohn incorporated Lessing’s reliance on reason, he rejected the individualist orientation of the German Romantics. Instead, he took up the cause for Jews who believed in their place as exclusive heirs to divine revelation through the Old Testament.

In addition to Lessing and Mendelssohn, Arendt discussed Herder<sup>46</sup>, who rejected Lessing’s notion of a human being as autonomous and in pursuit of an accessible truth. For Herder, reason is not a rational means of accessing the truth; rather, it is a progressive process that blankets all human beings in the quest. Such is history: a progressive, endless procession to an infinite truth. The point in explicating the positions of Lessing, Mendelssohn and Herder is that through their enmeshed views of history, the Jews’ history came to be seen as defined by their possession of the Old Testament, Arendt wrote- as the history of “God’s chosen people.” Not only that, but a chosen people who were forcefully dispersed, and as a result, transmitted their belief in the past as an authoritative, lawful force on present, daily life to those with whom they came in contact. For Herder, this explanation served to explain Jews’ “foreignness,” as well as their continued association with the Palestinian state. The state represented Jews’ tie to the past and its authority.

This situation created the fierce, violent oppression of the Jewish people, Herder believed, which lead to the modern Jewish question of assimilation and/or emancipation. The question is then a problem, as Jews can relinquish their role as the chosen people and assimilate, which aligns with the Enlightenment project of individualistic search for truth.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 8.

However, this would run counter to the Jewish idea of reliance on history and religion as definitive of the community and its moral and legal dictates.<sup>47</sup>

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND ANTI-SEMITISM

While Enlightenment promised something called universal human rights, the Jews faced an existential dilemma, as previously discussed. In order to assimilate into modern Europe, they were implicitly required to abandon the very history that defined them as a people in order to secure these rights and be granted emancipation. In theory, a generation of Jews embraced this idea, Arendt wrote in the 1930s essay called “Original Assimilation.” However, in reality, in day-to-day practice, individual Jews wrestled with the prospect when faced with the very personal question of baptism. This situation illustrates the reality that theoretical musings translated into real-world issues for Jews, as Arendt stated: “The Jewish question becomes a problem of the individual Jew.” For example, in an example of practice and theory colliding in the real lives of Jews, “the baptismal movement in the next generation shows that the Jewish question had become by then a problem for the individual Jew, had become the problem of somehow coming to terms with the world.”<sup>48</sup>

Regardless of the prevalence of Enlightenment debate about human rights in contemporary Europe, the reality was that Jews were not included in this conversation, let alone regarded as potential recipients of these rights. Instead, Jews, who were consistently the victim of Anti-Semitism, participated in society on the periphery, from their financial role in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to their violent casting out of modern society in the Holocaust. Anti-Semitism, she stated, was first manifest at the social level, and then,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Hannah Arendt. “Original Assimilation” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 23.

through daily occurrences, became culturally entrenched. As a result, Jews seeking emancipation could achieve this only by assuming the roles of either “philanthropist or freeloader. All those who exempted themselves from this alternative were lost from the Jewish world,” Arendt wrote.<sup>49</sup> This scenario originally occurred because at first “the Jew held status in society only as a usurer, just as in its culture he was only an enemy of Christ. In the feudal Christian world, status indicated profession.”<sup>50</sup> Status and profession, for the Jews, were “predetermined by religion,” thus fusing hatred for the Jewish people with hatred for their religion, Arendt explained. This hatred was, more often than not, a “random association” divorced from reality, although this arbitrary origin of the hatred did not lessen its growth.

In the shift to the modern era, this hatred morphed to a more economically and politically motivated anti-Semitism. Called “court Jews,” a select group acted as an economic link to state leaders, who in turn, granted them protection. Slowly, these “court Jews” became “creditor of absolutist states.”<sup>51</sup> As a result, Jews were incrementally awarded civil rights, but only on an economic, thus superficial and unequal basis. They were not enshrined and were only dependent on financial health, so presumably they could easily be rescinded at the whim of the state. “Human rights were ranked according to the ability to pay. General privileges, tantamount to emancipation, were not a ‘gift,’ but rather an exact compensation in the form of a reward,” she stated.<sup>52</sup>

## NATIONALISM AND IMPERIALISM

The economic situation, for Arendt, provided a strong explanation for anti-

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<sup>49</sup> Hannah Arendt. “Antisemitism” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 72.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

Semitism, and she based this on her opinion of the capitalist, imperialist regime. This regime created a system that was ravenous for entire “continents,” as opposed to the “limited territories” sought by nationalist tendencies. As a result, in a 1940s era essay responding to Zionist proposals, Arendt dismissed the possibility of a Jewish state “within an imperialist sphere of interest” as being the most dangerous outcome for Jews that would “arous(e) imperialist passion as a substitute for outdated nationalism, once the motor to set men into action.”<sup>53</sup>

A subset of imperialism, nationalism was an equally offensive force (particularly German-inspired nationalism) for Arendt. This was because the imperialist drive rendered the nation an “organic” body inevitably poised for eternal growth. Its peoples, then, were simply fuel for this body’s growth- “biological superhuman personalities.” In this light, nationalism was especially harmful to Jews, because in order for a Jewish sense of nationalism to exist, it was dependent on the “force of a foreign nation.” For the Jewish state, this was a collection of Arab states, and therefore a situation in which Jews must “either ask protection from an outside power against their neighbors or come to a working agreement with their neighbors.”<sup>54</sup>

Jews were inherently the victims in this imperial regime, as even though it functioned famously for many nations, it squeezed out many peoples in its drive to wealth and acquisition. This was due in part to the Jews’ statelessness and the associated lack of entrenched human rights for all. As a result, they were excluded from both “the national life” and the class struggles of their country, so not only are they stateless, but they do not fit in anywhere, either as a minority or a proletarian. As a result, their status

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<sup>53</sup> Hannah Arendt. “Zionism Reconsidered” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 371.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 344.



as persons subject to laws is non-existent, and thus they were un-naturalized. This reality, Arendt explained, constituted fertile ground for the creation of the concentration camps.<sup>55</sup>

#### NORMALIZATION OF JEWISH POLITICS

Given the historical extent of anti-Semitism and their stateless status in a nation-state oriented world, in the *Jewish Writings*, Arendt advocated for the “normalization” of Jewish politics.<sup>56</sup> This seemingly simplistic goal spoke to her fervent wish for Jews to secure a safe foothold in society. As she put it in a 1930s essay on Anti-Semitism, normalization would create the “conditions for the development of the Jewish substance. To become a people like all other peoples- that is the goal, but always with the specific provision: *like all other peoples.*”<sup>57</sup> In terms of outcome, for Arendt this meant the possession of a physically bounded state of their own, in which all Jews, not just “court” or wealthy Jews, enjoyed full human rights, not just an arbitrary collection of civil rights. In her own words, this means a “fully accredited international representation of Jewish Palestine that enjoys equal rights with all others.” This meant, in real terms, several components: representation at the United Nations in relation to negotiations surrounding Jewish/Palestine statehood and immigration, the establishment of a Jewish Army, and recognition of Second World War efforts by Jewish people.<sup>58</sup>

However, although a theoretical proposal regarding a Jewish state was a fine idea, Arendt identified a major roadblock in the form of a collective lack of optimism amongst Jews. Centuries of oppression, statelessness and enslavement had violently eroded this quality. As she wrote, oppressed peoples abandon even the basic hope of defending

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<sup>55</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007 141.

<sup>56</sup> Hannah Arendt. “Antisemitism” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 54.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Political Organization of the Jewish People” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 237.

themselves, and become a “living corpse,” and worse, a people that is restricted from self-defense becomes a “victim of world history.”<sup>59</sup> This apathy reached its apex in the concentration camps, where Jews suffered from a soul-destroying sense of meaninglessness, Arendt wrote: “Hope stronger than man- that means hope destructive of the very humanity of man...Their apathy was to a very large extent the almost physical, automatic response to the challenge of absolute meaninglessness.”<sup>60</sup>

Although I doubt there is little value added by my own judgment of Arendt’s statements from a contemporary, and incomparably safe situation in life, I have difficulty with her discussion of apathy. Apathy implies a lack of emotion or spirit. Arendt stated that it was first manifest in the Jewish people when they began leaving their fate in the hands of “plutocrats and philanthropists.” It was first intended as a means of survival, as she described it in a 1940s essay called “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening,” and this behavior resembled an animal playing dead to deflect attackers. However, she wrote that true danger for the Jewish people was not being attacked, but rather the exhibition of hope for a miracle. Paranoia was common, even when conditions were relatively safe.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, as a result of this docile acceptance of Anti-Semitism as a safe status quo, agitating or incendiary movements such as political solidarity in organizations were seen as “demagogic nonsense.” In other words, Arendt characterized the Jewish people as a passive and reactionary, second class citizenry that was satisfied with mere survival. It should be noted that this description appears to restrict comments related to the political and social involvement of the Jewish people, and is not meant as a normative

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<sup>59</sup> Hannah Arendt. “A Way towards the Reconciliation of Peoples” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 262.

<sup>60</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Destruction of Six Million” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 494.

<sup>61</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 165.

commentary on the qualities or personality traits. As she wrote, "...if the enemy is at the gate, we make constructive plans for the future-and forget about the coming day. When you realize what is at stake here, it could make your skin crawl."

To be fair, in speaking of apathy in the context of the concentration camps, Arendt did not appear to use the term in a derogatory fashion. Rather, it is almost used in the literal sense- that is, a people absolutely depleted of pathos in the face of prolonged misery, both for oneself and watching one's fellows suffer. More horrifically, Arendt referred to the fact that the sense of hope remaining amongst people trapped in the concentration camps was used as an implement to maintain their humanity, almost as a sole remedy to the dehumanizing effects of the camps. In this sense, the strictly human capacity to hope and project into the future for improving conditions was captured and capitalized upon in order to squeeze out the very last human essence. This is the essence of totalitarianism, according to Arendt: the absolute dehumanizing, amassing effect that eliminates individuality and freedom by eliminating a human being's ability to move and act.<sup>62</sup>

In analyzing the ability of the Jews to act in a regime of terror as a political journalist writing in *Aufbau*, Arendt has a decidedly unique perspective. She located some fault with the Jewish people for their lack of action in general, and their lack of participation in the social and political spheres. In instances they did act, Arendt described heroic and inspirational results when action and a united front emerged in dire circumstances. Action displayed itself in the form of solidarity amongst Jews, which could be seen as the flipside of apathy. This solidarity aggregated over time in response

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<sup>62</sup> Arendt (1955), 466.

to a common enemy, since “a common enemy can only awaken solidarity.”<sup>63</sup> (This common enemy Arendt referred to were the state regimes surrounding Israel and the Nazi regime.) According to Arendt, solidarity, and hope for an end to oppression, can be salvaged by even a miniscule sliver of hope for success in a fight against an enemy. As a result, it was better, at least from the standpoint of the possibility of survival, to belong to or support a guerrilla troop with food and supplies, than to sit in a concentration camp, or to participate in mass labor efforts, Arendt wrote. This was because doing what one was told engendered apathy and eroded the spirit of resistance. So in order for Jews to survive and fight back, the entire population of Europe (not just Jews) needed to “seethe with unrest” and “Anti-Semitism first had to be destroyed within the bloody school of Nazi terror for the courage of despair, which drives individuals to suicide, can never organize a people.” In other words, citizens- Jews and non-Jews alike- had to reject apathy, and stand up against the terror created by the “policy of wiping out entire populations (which) made blind obedience more dangerous than open rebellion.”<sup>64</sup>

#### POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In terms of her own actions, Arendt’s call to shake off this apathy, and participate in thoughtful action manifest itself in her daily life. Although she was never directly involved in political affairs in a traditional capacity such as elected official, she participated in some fashion for most of her life in an indirect manner. This involvement and practice in the public, political realm informed her writings throughout her life on many levels. Included in her activities were her political pieces for *Aufbau*, her constant engagement in conversation about political matters with her peers and politicians, and she

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<sup>63</sup> Arendt (2007) 156.

<sup>64</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Political Organization of the Jewish People” in *The Jewish Writing*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 200.

volunteered with Youth Aliyah, an organization that aimed to help German and eastern European Jewish youth with the emigration process to Palestine.<sup>65</sup>

Arendt's belief in action (not only large group-based political actions such as uprisings, but small, individual daily actions) is particularly evident in a 1930s essay called "Some young people are going home." In this essay, she spoke of the hopeless futures of the children of displaced and "stateless" Jewish families, who had "no future" in terms of a profession, and were "exploited" by their parents' demands that they work. In an attempt to give these youths a chance at future employment and integration in society, an Israeli-based organization called Youth Aliyah brought them to Palestine where they received "schooling and practical education." The result, Arendt wrote, was a solidarity among an "entire, large group" who could "build the country for himself and others, and for those who will come after him... This joy, this dignity and this youth will be converted into strength and this strength will rebuild the country."<sup>66</sup>

Arendt was especially pleased with one young man, who, upon moving to Palestine, was able to "solve the Jewish question in a practical way through agriculture." This is a telling statement: Arendt's idealism of achieving justice and freedom through securing a homeland for the Jews is fortified, but tempered, with her realism: in order to realize an ideal, one must necessarily take less than appealing, or risky actions- ie youths moving away from their families to a new homeland. But a natural human capacity for adaptation and resilience can quickly remedy the situation, she stated. "As for the children, as soon as they are put in a different atmosphere and given work, they quickly recover their natural dignity." In addition to this material goal of creating employment

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, xvii.

<sup>66</sup> Hannah Arendt. "Some Young People Are Going Home" in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 37..

opportunities, Youth Aliyah's goal at a larger scale was to slowly undermine the pervasive anti-semitism of the time by imbuing Jewish youth with hope and pride they so lacked.<sup>67</sup>

#### ARENDR'S EMERGING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

There are two ways in which we can distill Arendt's political philosophy in the *Jewish Writings*. The first is to examine her practical, political suggestions in terms of the recommendations she made for issues such as securing a Jewish state in Palestine, or urging her fellow Jews to action. Secondly, we can analyze the accompanying commentary to these suggestions.

To begin with, we can turn to some particularly revealing comments related to political participation that appear in a 1960s essay called "The Eichmann Controversy". In this response to an abundance of negative reactions following the release of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*<sup>68</sup>, Arendt explained her critique of a lack of action on the part of Jews who were forced to participate in the Nazi regime. While she asserted that the possibility of resisting was "non-existent," she suggested that "there existed the possibility of doing nothing." This did not require any extraordinary display of strength, rather, it called for a simple declaration of one's status as a "simple Jew," Arendt wrote.<sup>69</sup> However, even this action (Arendt called it a possibility of nonparticipation) was extremely difficult given the corrosive effect of the totalitarian system, but she wrote that these people still had a "limited freedom of decision and action."

The point is that even in an atmosphere in which the realm of possible actions is

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>68</sup> Hannah Arendt. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. New York: Penguin Books, 1967.

<sup>69</sup> Hannah Arendt. "The Eichmann Controversy" in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 468.

reduced to a choice of *not* acting, this is still a personalized, individual choice in that it is preceded by thought and a careful consideration of one's political and social surroundings. As she wrote, "These people still had a certain, limited freedom of decision and of action...Since we are dealing in politics with men, and not with heroes or saints, it is this possibility of nonparticipation."<sup>70</sup>

This limited option of nonparticipation illustrates the effectiveness of the totalitarian regime and its goal of suffocating the potential to act, and thus the vital signs of a healthy society: freedom and justice. But still, the *possibility* of action remained an eternal, infinite option available to human beings, therefore achieving freedom and justice was still a possibility. However, for Arendt, that is achieved only when human beings act, especially in the face of oppression, or worse, death. So action supersedes ideals upheld by human beings, even in a devastated society.

Despite this focus on action, Arendt revealed in her own political philosophy the remnants of a tendency towards idealism: that is, she still aimed at freedom and justice. In a 1940s essay called "Jewish Politics," Arendt exhibited her belief in the need of a people to uphold ideals when she wrote that "the only political ideals an oppressed people can have are freedom and justice."<sup>71</sup> The danger, however, in upholding ideals is that they become empty and meaningless, Arendt wrote. A society wedded to empty ideals is engaged in a type of *realpolitik*, she wrote in this essay. In this atmosphere, businessmen pursue meaningless wins and losses and stock market gains; intellectual activity is seen as worthless and the self is of primary importance. Dictatorships trump democracy and "might makes right." In particular for Jewish politics, de-moralized Jews worship those

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 469.

<sup>71</sup> Hannah Arendt. "Jewish Politics" in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 241.

who hold the reins of power, having never held onto them for themselves. The way Arendt described it, there is little hope that the Jewish people can “relearn” the language of freedom and justice.<sup>72</sup>

However, Arendt acknowledged that while the Jewish people may have forgotten these ideals of freedom and justice, that does not preclude them from attaining them. Even having forgotten these ideals, the Jewish people were historically steadfast in their will to live, although for two centuries, it had been “degenerating” into the will to survive at any price. The result of this degeneration was a secular and demoralized people stripped of any nationalistic sentiment. It is also a people who do not experience the very human sentiment of pleasure. This demoralized people, who lack nationalistic spirit, is the very reason Arendt demanded the formation of a Jewish army. As she wrote, “the defense of Palestine is part of the struggle for freedom of the Jewish people.”<sup>73</sup> The creation of an army is explicitly not a utopian goal, Arendt said, but in her opinion, entailed a stringent requirement: the participation of all Jews from all states.<sup>74</sup> Uniform participation in the army would also allow Jews to feel ownership of a defeat of Hitler and true freedom, and thus “put an end-and an honorable end- to all fantastical talk about a Jewish war.” This, for Arendt, was because “you can only defend yourself as the person you are attacked as.”

More specifically in terms of a Jewish army, Arendt called for participation not from wealthy and privileged Jews, but at the grassroots. As she wrote, “...only the people themselves are strong enough for a true alliance.” So Arendt was suggesting that Jews

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<sup>72</sup>Hannah Arendt. “Peace or Armistice in the Near East” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 423.

<sup>73</sup>Hannah Arendt. “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 137.

<sup>74</sup>Hannah Arendt. “The Eichmann Controversy” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 466.



draw on their strong will to survive and funnel their action to form an army, despite their statelessness.<sup>75</sup> This action would allow entry into the international state structure, she seems to be suggesting. The problem is that this very statelessness makes it difficult for Jews to defend themselves as Jews; they have no homeland from which to launch themselves.

## ZIONISM

Arendt's theories on Zionism (the movement to establish a Jewish state in Israel) are central to understanding her political philosophy. In the Introduction to the *Jewish Writings*, Ron Feldman explains that Arendt based her theories on those of thinkers Theodor Herzl and Bernard Lazare, who shared her experience as a Jew rejected by their own community. Arendt found merit in both thinkers, but was partial to Lazare, since she had difficulty with the fact that Herzl's call for a Jewish state was based on a belief that anti-semitism was unchangeable and eternal. This false belief, she wrote in a 1940s essay called "Zionism Reconsidered" was corrosive because it "led to a very dangerous misappraisal of political conditions in every country."<sup>76</sup> However, Arendt admired Herzl's intellectual bent and tendency to call his fellow Jews to action. For Arendt, Herzl's Zionism ultimately boiled down to realpolitik, or international relations, and in negotiating for a Jewish state in this context, meant fleeing reality and ignoring politics rather than attempting to assimilate.<sup>77</sup>

With this reaction to Herzl in mind, we can now witness Arendt's closer allegiance to Lazare. Rather than seeing the Jews as an outcast people who must flee the

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<sup>75</sup>Hannah Arendt. "The Jewish War That Isn't Happening" in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 137.

<sup>76</sup>Hannah Arendt. "Zionism Reconsidered" in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 358.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid*, *liv*.

international structure into an isolated state of their own, Lazare-who coined Arendt's preferred terms of 'pariah' and 'parvenu' to describe Jews- insisted on using Jews' pariah (outsider) status as a tool for political analysis, as opposed to this status being an unchanging reality. In this context, Lazare called for a Jewish nation first, and the establishment of a territory second.<sup>78</sup> The commonality Arendt saw between Herzl and Lazare, and that which she incorporated into her analysis (and her subsequent political philosophy), was a call to action to the Jewish people, both the masses and the elites. This call to action, in terms of the Zionist movement, particularly translated for Arendt into a call for a Jewish cultural centre (a Yishuv) in Palestine. This Yishuv would not be merely the creation of a new, physically bounded territory in the international state system, but it would necessarily be a conscious effort on the part of the Jewish people, writes Feldman.<sup>79</sup> This effort would include the establishment of a Hebrew University, health centers and agricultural efforts, and despite the fact that their creation would be "artificial", it would constitute action, and therefore a "positive response" to the lack of a homeland on the part of the Jews, for Arendt. As she wrote, "...the responses were of much more permanent human and political value than the challenges, and that only ideological distortions made it appear that the challenges by themselves-anti-Semitism, poverty, national homelessness-had produced something."<sup>80</sup>

In discussing these two mainstream methods of solving the Jewish problem in relation to nationalism (Zionism or assimilation), Arendt said there are two solutions: "complete assimilation-that is actual disappearance- or emigration." The problem is,

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, lvi.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, lix.

<sup>80</sup> Hannah Arendt. "Peace or Armistice in the Near East" in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 436.

then, that both alternatives represent an escape from reality, and a retreat from the fight against anti-Semitism.<sup>81</sup> In this context, it is important to note that the creation of a sovereign and homogenous Jewish state was insufficient for Arendt. Rather, in keeping with her practical nature, Arendt espoused a bi-national confederate state, which, in her opinion, would acknowledge the reality of the minority Arab population. As she wrote, “The very term ‘confederation’ indicates the existence of two independent political entities, as contrasted with a federal system, which is usually regarded as ‘a multiple government in a single state.’”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, Arendt wrote that a minority-majority structure was “insoluble by definition.” In terms of institutional structure, a common government for Palestines and Jews would be based upon “community councils,” a structure that would encourage resolution of issues at the “lowest and most promising level of proximity and neighborliness.”<sup>83</sup>

Arendt based these suggestions on the writings of Dr. Judah Magnes, a thinker who acknowledged the historical and religious claim of both Palestinians and Jews to the territory. Without a “regional federation,” structure, tensions would continue and relations would dissolve into ongoing conflict. The homogenous Jewish state would then build up an army that was highly dependent on U.S. funds, sparking further acrimony with Arab neighbors. Arendt was so invested and hopeful about this suggestion that in a 1950s essay called “Federation or Balkanization,” she expressed a belief that such a federated structure “could serve as a model for the whole region.”<sup>84</sup> For Arendt, a strict

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<sup>81</sup>Hannah Arendt. “Zionism Reconsidered” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 353.

<sup>82</sup> Hannah Arendt. “Peace or Armistice in the Near East” in *The Jewish Writings* New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 446.

<sup>83</sup> Hannah Arendt. “To Save the Jewish Homeland” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 400.

<sup>84</sup> Hannah Arendt. “Peace or Armistice in the Near East” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken

partitioning of a Jewish state would be “wishful thinking” that would “result in arrested development for both peoples.” Worse, it would create a platform from which to launch war.

The other aspect of Arendt’s suggestion of a confederated, binational state was an acknowledgement of an Israeli state’s “economic isolation.” As it stood, without integration into not only the region, but the international economy, Israelis would be unable to support future generations. Modernization and integration would create a situation more conducive to peace amongst residents, and would avoid the nurturing of “rampant nationalism,” which, Arendt wrote, could easily encourage the dangerous situation of “national sovereignty, which so long had been the very symbol of free national developments, has become the greatest danger to national survival for small nations.”<sup>85</sup>

#### POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE *JEWISH WRITINGS*

In attempting to determine an Arendtian political philosophy in the *Jewish Writings*, it is worth quoting at length her suggestions regarding the Jewish question related to the establishment of a state. It should be noted that her practical suggestions changed slightly during the course of her career, but the philosophy, or essence, remains consistent, which will be discussed shortly. This excerpt appears in a 1940s essay called “To Save the Jewish Homeland”.

“...the following axiomatic criteria for the good and the bad, the right and the wrong: 1) the real goal of the Jews in Palestine is the building up of a Jewish homeland. This goal must never be sacrificed to the pseudo-sovereignty of a Jewish state. 2) The independence of Palestine can be achieved only on a solid basis of Jewish-Arab co-operation. As long as Jewish and Arab leaders both claim that there is ‘no bridge’ between Jews

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Books, 2007, 447.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 450.

and Arabs (as Moshe Shertok has put it) , the territory cannot be left to the political wisdom of its own inhabitants. 3) The elimination of all terrorist groups (and not agreements with them) and swift punishment of all terrorist deeds (and not merely protests against them) will be the only valid proof that the Jewish people in Palestine has recovered its sense of political reality and that Zionist leadership is again responsible enough to be trusted with the destinies of the yishuv. 4) Immigration to Palestine, limited in numbers and time, is the only ‘irreducible minimum’ in Jewish politics. 5) Local self government and mixed Jewish-Arab municipal and rural councils, on a small scale and as numerous as possible, are the only realistic political measures that can eventually lead to the political emancipation of Palestine. It is still not too late.”<sup>86</sup>

If we return to Arendt’s first statement, we can see that, even in the choice of words (homeland), she favored language that appeals to the hearts and minds of readers, rather than the dry, bureaucratic language of international relations. Above all else, for Arendt, Jews must feel at home, regardless of whether or not they have international recognition. Here, we see her political aims of freedom and justice coloring her suggestions, with a tinge of practicality: Jews physically require a place to rest if they are to achieve these ideals. In a realistic recognition of the fact that a homogenous Jewish state was not practical, and in fact, could provoke further conflict, Arendt’s suggestion that co-operation amongst Jews and Arabs was paramount makes sense. (The third and fourth items are more technically based instructions, again, illustrating the practical nature Arendt developed after years as a political journalist.) The final suggestion indicates Arendt’s fierce belief in grassroots, spirited participation amongst members of a shared community. Indeed, she suggested mixed councils. As we have seen, Arendt experienced first hand, in her political dealings, the power of local organizations sprung from a wish to improve conditions of one’s fellows.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hannah Arendt. “To Save the Jewish Homeland” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 401.

<sup>87</sup> As Elizabeth Young-Bruehl writes, Arendt believed in power as manifest in “spontaneously organized,

In a 1940s essay called “The Political Organization of the Jewish People” Arendt again displayed optimism in the power of the human spirit to act spontaneously, even despite oneself, in political matters. The 1942 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a months-long rebellion amongst concentration camp prisoners who fought against the Nazi Secret Service police for Arendt constituted an example of this. Unfortunately, while most Jews died in this uprising, they managed, with few weapons and sheer willpower, to mount a strong campaign. This event, Arendt wrote, occurred despite the Jews’ experience of going through “so many hells that no one else can still instill fear in them and who have been fooled so many times by vain hopes that they will not be duped by anyone else.”<sup>88</sup> This relatively late resistance movement represented both the alleged tendency of Jews to be docile and un-reactive to the Gestapo when it came to deport them, but the uprising also “changed the face of the Jewish people,” Arendt wrote. This was because it marked the last Nazi victory, as well as sparking further defensive efforts on the part of a previously apathetic Jewish population.

For Arendt, this marked a turning point in how the Jewish population’s perception of itself in the context of these horrific conditions. They were victims, yet despite the fact that most options to participate and defend oneself were eliminated, some miniscule possible actions existed. As she wrote, “a group of workers and intellectuals realized that ultimately armed resistance was the only moral and political way out.”<sup>89</sup> Arendt further expanded on the constant availability of some form of action in discussing those Jews who were forced to betray their fellows by cooperating with the Nazis during the “Final

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locally based councils”, or Rates. She writes in the context of revolutions: “Hannah Arendt was harshly critical of any leadership that abandoned its local base, the true source of its power. (Young-Bruehl, 1982, 128).

<sup>88</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Political Organization of the Jewish People” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 215.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 216.

Solution.” For Arendt, the ability to act remained through the possibility of “nonparticipation”<sup>90</sup>. Setting aside the controversial nature of this claim as it relates to personal responsibility and how much choice they really had, one can see Arendt’s philosophy arise here: one’s humanity and dignity is always available through a careful consideration of the choices one has. This is clearly a theoretical and idealistic philosophy based on the presence of natality in human beings. This philosophy of natality reaches beyond individual responsibility and becomes political in that Arendt clearly believed that human beings should consider their actions as part of a community that strives for justice and freedom.

In the specific instance of the responsibility of Jews “co-operating” with the Nazi regime, Arendt also pointed out that these individuals were not subject to the soul-destroying conditions of the concentration camps. With this qualification in mind, we can see her philosophy on totalitarianism and humanity present: the camps destroyed all dignity and created a mass of human beings unable to access their ability to think and act and participate. Thus, she heaped more blame on those who retained a degree of freedom and did not access their ability to act. As she wrote, “the distinction between victims and persecutors was blurred in the concentration camps, deliberately and with calculation...”<sup>91</sup>

In addition to the striving for the ideals of justice and freedom in a political community, Arendt discussed the underlying, preconceived notion of equality. Ideally, these ideals should apply and be available to every citizen. In the context of the time Arendt wrote, Jews were not equal in terms of basic civil rights. However, she did not

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<sup>90</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Eichmann Controversy” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 468.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 469.

explicitly tackle the notion of equality in the *Jewish Writings*. The most explicit discussion occurs in a 1940s essay called “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening,” in which she shows a strong belief in a fundamental, inalienable equality based mainly on the sheer biological reality that we all share a physical constitution. As she wrote, “The idea of a fundamental, natural inequality of peoples, which is the form that injustice has taken over time, can only be defeated by the idea of an original and inalienable equality among those who bear a human countenance.”<sup>92</sup>

With this discussion of justice, freedom and equality in mind, one can more carefully attempt to derive Arendt’s political philosophy in the *Jewish Writings*. It is clear that if one exists, it is replete with contradictions. Perhaps the following quote best illustrates this claim: “...the role of the heart in politics seems to me altogether questionable...” This statement appears relatively late in the *Jewish Writings* in a response to a criticism from a peer about Eichmann in Jerusalem’s purported lack of compassion. Arendt stated that emotions are necessary in politics (“...there can be no patriotism without permanent opposition...”), and that for her personally, grief about the wrongs done by the Jewish people is necessary as a “motive for certain actions or attitudes,” emotions. However, she went on to say that “emotions are used in order to conceal factual truths.”<sup>93</sup> So it is clear that Arendt exhibited ambivalence as to the role of emotions in politics: she was suspicious of the cold, emotionless actions of realpolitik, but she was also skeptical of the distorting effect that emotions and the heart play in politics and the public realm.

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<sup>92</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Jewish War That Isn’t Happening” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 157.

<sup>93</sup> Hannah Arendt. “The Eichmann Controversy” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 467.



Over the years as a writer for *Aufbau*, in this role as political agitator and thinker, Arendt displayed a range of opinions and urgings, from purely practical (a binational confederated Palestinian state); to an ambiguous admonition to Jews to pursue freedom and justice. She denounced realpolitik, yet accepted its ubiquity; she absolutely advocated to the Jewish population that it rouse itself from its apathy and maintain allegiance to the pursuit of freedom and justice, yet the statement above indicates the curious denouncement of emotion in politics. She called for the necessity of the creation of a Jewish “homeland”, but stopped short at a sovereign state, as that would represent a capitulation to the oppressive imperialist state system, which is the original responsible regime that cast out the Jews and rendered them homeless and thus vulnerable to its tyrannical whims. Indeed, Arendt wanted nothing more than for Jews to gain admittance to the international, political realm, become “normalized”, and become “like everyone else.” This is another curious contention, given the Jews’ chronic outsider status and claim of firsthand religious knowledge, but it illustrates, once again, Arendt’s practical nature.

She also claimed that hope and fear were, paradoxically, the very essential emotions that lead Jews to their deaths in the concentration camps. By retaining these all-too-human emotions, the Jews retained the last shreds of their humanity, thus allowing themselves to live and persevere in the sub-human conditions, which ultimately lead them to die in the fashion their enemies wished.

So if this is true, it would seem to make some sense that Arendt dismissed the presence of the heart in politics. But, especially taking into account Plato’s formulation of the ideal ruler as a balanced combination of strength, courage and intellect, one might

then pose the question to her: what is the pursuit of justice and freedom without a conviction of one's heart to something higher than oneself; an ideal? How can one then conduct oneself in political matters without the courage gleaned from one's heart to remain committed to the ultimate human aspirations of freedom and justice? Perhaps this curious statement illustrates the reality of the situation: in the face of such horrific and unthinkable de-humanization associated with totalitarian movements, the matters of the heart become superfluous. But the contradiction rears its head during the slow process of the reconstruction of the Jewish people: the heart (and its natural goals of freedom and justice) are essential to re-enter society, as well as essential to understanding what led to such a situation and possibly allowing humanity to uphold the promise of "never again."

#### *THE HUMAN CONDITION*

The thoughts come to me,  
I am no longer a stranger to them.  
I grow in them as in a place,  
As in a plowed field.<sup>94</sup>

#### BACKGROUND

Arendt wrote this poem upon completing the *Origins of Totalitarianism*. In addition to marking the end of this work, it represented a return to the partially written *Human Condition*. This accomplishment represented not only her turn to political philosophy, but also represented a turning point in her academic life in that she rejected the mainstream theory amongst her peers that European Enlightenment thought was an

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<sup>94</sup> Young-Bruehl, (1982), 222.

inescapable precursor to the Nazi regime<sup>95</sup>. Thus, with *Origins of Totalitarianism* completed, she marked a drastic turn from her roots, and embarked on a new project with the *Human Condition*. This book constituted her radically changed philosophical foundation- the “plowed field” to which she referred.

In order to understand the roots of the *Human Condition*, some brief background is helpful, especially as it relates to her best-known work, *Origins of Totalitarianism*. In her biography of Hannah Arendt, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl writes that the *Human Condition* was a natural response to Arendt’s critique of Marxism in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. This book also marked the beginning of Arendt’s critique of modernity and industrialization, and their impact on human activity. As Arendt explained in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the modern world caused a sense of “uprootedness,” “isolation,” and “worldlessness”.<sup>96</sup> Modernity and its technological advancements had rendered individuals superfluous, which created a thoughtless, mass society. Arendt believed that in this imperialistic system that relied on the nation-state as its organizing force, stateless Jews were naturally the victims.<sup>97</sup> In addition to the situation at hand, *The Human Condition* picked up on this analysis of modernity by investigating Marx’ predictions as they related to the automation of human activity and the progression to Marx’ notion of the end of history, in which human beings would be freed from labor and would overturn traditional political structures and institutions.

Given the ambitious goal of the *Human Condition*- an expansive account of Marx’ thought- writing it proved almost too overwhelming for Arendt. Her conception of

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Arendt (1955) 317.

<sup>97</sup> Hannah Arendt “Answers To Questions Submitted By Samuel Grafton” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 475.

the project was a vast underestimation, and she realized that it would instead need to comprise an entire history of political philosophy. In her own words, Arendt compared her intended project to appearing before a judge after attempting a “little robbery”, expecting to serve couple of years in prison, but instead receiving a “prison sentence of God knows how long.”<sup>98</sup> I believe the comment illustrates not only the weight of the ambition Arendt possessed, but her own torturous and personal struggle with reconciling how she understood the origins of the Holocaust. This can be explained at several levels, or through several aspects of her personality: as a Jew who escaped the horrific conditions of the concentration camps; as a member of the political and intellectual elite who possessed a degree of influence; as a historical Jew and the implications of the extent of personal and collective responsibility, and as a German female. This theory returns to the suggestion of Benhabib that her personal experiences played a role in her development as a political philosopher.

The writing of *The Human Condition* was also overwhelming because Arendt purportedly (if not cognitively) undertook this academic enterprise at a personal level. It is conceivable that she felt the responsibility for the past, and her role in it, as an exiled German Jewess who escaped Germany. In general, one can say that the delicate exercise of trying to understand the past and present also automatically implicates oneself because such an implication supposes a degree of responsibility in that if one can presently understand the roots of an event, one perhaps could have recognized them at the outset had they been alert enough. Witness her harsh criticism in the *Jewish Writings* of Jews and their satisfaction with mere survival, with playing dead, as well as their financial role in society and the resulting hatred it generated in the rest of society. Recall also Arendt's

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<sup>98</sup> Young-Bruehl (1982), 223.

comments on history and pearl-diving previously stated from her essay on Walter Benjamin.

#### POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN *JEWISH WRITINGS* AND *HUMAN CONDITION*

Despite some commentary from Arendt herself in the *Human Condition*, it is still difficult to derive a specific formulation of a political philosophy both in this work. However, in the *Human Condition*, which this section will explore, Arendt's political philosophy centers on her concept of natality and freedom. In the *Jewish Writings*, she urged a striving towards the ideals of justice and freedom for the Jewish people, who were locked out of the international system that granted these rights inherently through the state system. This section of the thesis will explore the plausibility of a political philosophy in both the *Jewish Writings* and the *Human Condition*, how they are linked and how the latter served as a basis for the *Human Condition*.

In the *Jewish Writings*, Arendt depicted a striving for freedom and justice amongst the Jews that was remarkably intact, despite a crushing sense of apathy and a consistent unwillingness to act. This striving was defiantly based on the notion of equality, despite an abhorrent lack of equality the Jews experienced throughout much of their history. In the *Jewish Writings*, Arendt posited a notion of equality based on a biological, reductive and simplistic notion of humanity; that is, we all physically possess a countenance<sup>99</sup>. This is indisputable and physically grounded, as opposed to metaphysically grounded. So while Arendt did not claim a knowable human nature upon which we can ground human rights, she found an inarguable commonality within a plurality of human beings that can serve as a starting point for equality.

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<sup>99</sup> Hannah Arendt. "The Jewish War That Isn't Happening" in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 157.

This stark, non-idealistic notion of equality as the foundation for human rights in the *Jewish Writings* is in direct contrast to the idealism of the *Human Condition*. In this book, Arendt trained a thread of natality throughout work as the remedy to the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the associated worldlessness and alienation of the modern world. But despite this display of idealism, she was quick to remind readers of the danger in trying to create utopian societies: they all “broke down quickly under the weight of reality...” she wrote,<sup>100</sup> as a result of the uncontrollable and imperfect nature of human relations.

#### NATALITY

In attempting to reconstruct Arendt’s turn to political philosophy in the *Human Condition*, I will show that she positioned natality, or new beginnings, as a metaphysical remedy to the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century she witnessed. This turn represents a somewhat uneasy acknowledgement of the complicated tension associated with the fact that for successful human affairs (with success being at the very least an avoidance of events such as the Holocaust) there is a necessity for the presence of both politics and philosophy, both thought and action and theory and practice.

But first, in order to understand the concept of natality, one must trace back through Arendt’s notions of the private and public realms; work, labor, action and the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*.

The first step to understanding Arendt’s philosophy in the *Human Condition* requires that one proceed immediately to her concept of natality. Surprisingly, although natality underpins not only the *Human Condition*, but much of Arendt’s work, the word itself only appears in this book a handful of times. Natality, for Arendt, represented the

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<sup>100</sup> Arendt, (1955), 227.

common denominator of human existence: “birth and death, natality and mortality.”<sup>101</sup> At first glance, this appears to be yet another reductive definition, especially since Arendt explicitly denied a commonly identifiable human nature. So with only biological realities, and a lack of a knowable human nature (for Arendt, knowledge of human nature is such “that only a god could know and define...”<sup>102</sup>) to define man, what is the significance of natality, and how does it create a platform from which to launch a new type of politics, as Arendt called for?

Natality, for Arendt, was not merely a biological reality that defines human beings. It is also a capacity that can rescue human beings from themselves and from the inevitable and egregious behavior they will engage in. As she wrote, it is a “miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs.” To be specific, natality saves the world by allowing human beings, through their birth and appearance to fellow human beings, to act. This can “bestow upon human affairs faith and hope...”<sup>103</sup> In a footnote, Arendt explained this hope and faith as not being exclusively divine; she believed human faith is powerful enough to realize miracles. But the ability to act anew (natality) is a prerequisite, she stated.

Another definitive quality of natality is that it alerts us to the fact that we are subject to time, to past and future moments. Natality supposes that although human beings live in the gap of the present moment,<sup>104</sup> through thought, they can always access the past and future moments surrounding them. It is at this point of Arendt’s formulation of natality and human relations that she became more complex in terms of explaining a

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<sup>101</sup> Arendt, (1958), 8.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>104</sup> Arendt (1965). 114.

possible political philosophy. Natality gives birth to action and speech, the uniquely human capacity for appearing in the world that can produce a miracle. In light of the reality that man lives in the gap of the present, he is unable to additionally live in the past or the future moments. As a result, he is unable to travel to past moments in which he made mistakes, nor can he assure the outcome of his actions in the future. Clearly, this can be problematic in a society in which a plurality of individuals are competing with one another for scarce resources, and to secure an infinite number of desired outcomes. Collisions, intrusions and conflict are inevitable. But Arendt saw a uniquely human remedy to a world in which action is essential but wildly unpredictable in terms of results. As she wrote: “The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end.”

Furthermore, we are all subject to biological necessity in that we are all living beings attempting to continue to do so. As a result of this ongoing biological drive to continue the lives of oneself and one’s surrounding community, there exists a common human experience of plurality. For Arendt, plurality was the “condition of human action because we 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.”<sup>105</sup> The plurality that defines the *Human Condition* also encompasses the reality that we are conditioned by the unavoidable contact with one another.<sup>106</sup> This plurality is a result of the fact that we see one another only from our own vantage point. “Being seen and heard by others derive their

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<sup>105</sup> Arendt, (1958), 233.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 9.



significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position.”<sup>107</sup>

So while we share the experience that we are unique and cannot be reproduced, biology levels us with its unavoidable boundary of life (new beginnings) and death (ending). Further to this, biology dictates that we must participate in certain activities as we aim at securing the continuation of our existence. Arendt described these activities as action, labor and work. Labor is defined as “the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor.” Work is “the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by the species’ ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an ‘artificial’ world of things...” and is also the activity which ties human beings to the world. In other words, it creates the human condition of worldliness. Action is a higher endeavor, as it “engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the conditions for remembrance, that is, for history.” It corresponds to the human condition of plurality, and occurs between human beings free of the “intermediary of things or matter.”<sup>108</sup>

The significance of these terms, especially for the purposes of this thesis, is twofold. First, these terms are unique to Arendt and define not only the words she chose to use to describe the experiences of the human condition, but also set her apart in the way in which she regarded politics. In order to understand Arendt, one must first understand these terms, which also pave the way for understanding the ways in which Arendt categorized human relations (the public and private realms, which will be

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 7.

discussed shortly). Second, these terms appear late in Arendt's life work, which marks her turn to a re-examined and re-defined political philosophy. By seeking to categorize and explain human relations, Arendt was implicitly and concurrently admitting the existence of the possibility of a knowable human nature. Even though Arendt denied its knowability, I argue that this human nature is the quality of natality, the capacity for new beginnings, which ideally demands of one a minimum of thought before action. We can now turn to Arendt's explanations of the public and private realms, the venue in which action occurs.

#### PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

First, it is helpful to include a definition of political action that appears in a collection of essays called *Between Past and Future*. In an essay called "What is Freedom?"<sup>109</sup> Arendt wrote that the public realm guarantees freedom by preserving the space in which it can appear. This conception of the public realm as guarantor of freedom mirrors the duality that is first played out in an individual: man is free within himself to engage in thought and dialogue; he becomes human through speech in that he articulates his thoughts and feelings, after they have been acknowledged and processed internally. For Arendt, this was the ultimate political experience; man is seen and heard and makes himself known. Without this experience, we are animals, or worse, we become victims of a totalitarian regime where we have lost the ability to act and speak.<sup>110</sup>

This notion of the public and private realms, for Arendt, grew from her extensive studies on the Greek and Roman regimes. In the Greek public realm represented the only venue where one could show himself and engage in action.. In modern political

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<sup>109</sup> Arendt, (1955). 115.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 26.

configurations, society- or the social- became publicized in the modern world, and “mass society” replaced the family as the definitive unit. Conversely, in the ancient world, the private sphere remained sheltered, as it was home to the violence associated with the life cycle: procreation and death itself. As Arendt wrote, women and slaves were confined to the private realm, as they were stewards of the “necessities of life.”<sup>111</sup>

These notions of the public and private realms precede Arendt’s conception of the common good. In order to preserve this common world, it was for Arendt absolutely essential to maintain a space in which men and women can express themselves. If not, this suppression constitutes the seeds of a totalitarian regime, where people’s freedom of expression is squeezed so much that individuals are rendered as mere formless parts of a mass society. This, in turn, abolishes courage, which perpetuates the oppression inherent in a totalitarian regime.<sup>112</sup>

The common world, for Arendt, was the space in which members of a society regard one another, and if done properly, preserve it and encourage the plurality that is inherent in the human condition<sup>113</sup>. In this common world, regardless of social stature, people fixate on a common object. If not, this is what leads to tyrannies, Arendt wrote. “The human sense of reality demands that men actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow.”<sup>114</sup>

The emphasis on the public realm is understandable, especially when examined in light of the politics presented in the *Jewish Writings*. As just previously established,

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<sup>111</sup> Arendt, (1958), 41.

<sup>112</sup> Arendt, (1955), 317.

<sup>113</sup> Arendt, (1958), 26.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 208.

Arendt traced the roots of totalitarianism back to the loss of the public realm. Preceding this loss, however, is the creation of a mass society in which the individual becomes extremely isolated and therefore lacks normal social relationships.<sup>115</sup> It is conceivable that in this atmosphere of mass society and radical isolation, the public realm loses its meaning and individual speech and action falls on deaf ears as every member of society is living in his or her own bubble. This radical isolation leads to a mass subscription to the ideologies presented by those in power. “While isolation concerns only the political realm of life, loneliness concerns human life as a whole. Totalitarian governments, like all tyrannies, certainly could not exist without destroy public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities.”<sup>116</sup>

#### THE JEWISH PUBLIC REALM: KIBBUTZES AND SALONS

Part of the problem in terms of the treatment of Jews, as Arendt explained it, was that they never gained entry to the public realm. It is enlightening, on this matter, to note Arendt’s portrayal of a group of wealthy Berlin Jewesses reacted to this oppressive pariah status by creating their own sort of public realm in the salons of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Arendt revealed her affinity for such a phenomenon in her biography of Rachel Varnhagen, writes Seyla Benhabib. They encouraged a social sphere (albeit isolated from the greater public realm and not marked by the agonism of the Greek polis) civic friendships in which women specifically could engage in speech and action and were guaranteed equality.<sup>117</sup> For Arendt, this represented a quintessential political action.

In addition to the salons, we can again see Arendt’s belief in a healthy public realm in her description of the kibbutz movement (she called it the most promising of all

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<sup>115</sup> Arendt (1955), 317.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 475.

<sup>117</sup> Benhabib 17.

social experiments made in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as well as the most magnificent part of the Jewish homeland) in the *Jewish Writings* as another ideal political action. This is curious, since in isolation, the kibbutz movement constituted a spontaneous political community with relative equality and opportunity to express oneself, however, the kibbutz residents lived apart from the rest of the community. In fact, their very rejection from mainstream society was the reason for their retreat. Nevertheless, Arendt discussed the kibbutzes and their “complete freedom”<sup>118</sup> fondly, and thus indicated her affinity for these “new type of Jews” who were “too decent for politics.”<sup>119</sup> These Jews represented a “new type of man,” and as a result of their retreat to the “moon”, established new social ideals, and encouraged social justice with “newly established values: their genuine contempt for material wealth, exploitation and bourgeois life; their unique combination of culture and labor; their rigorous realization of social justice within their small circle; and their loving pride in the fertile soil, the work of their hands, together with an utter and surprising lack of any wish for personal possessions.”

The drawback, of course, to this isolation is a complete lack of political influence; ironically the very problem plaguing the Jews Arendt identified originally. These Jews were willing to trade participation in mainstream politics for peace to pursue their own goals in the manner they wished. The loss of the kibbutzes, Arendt wrote, would be “one of the severest blows to the hopes of all those” people who were cast out from society and were unable to make peace with their neighbors, she wrote.<sup>120</sup> It should be noted that this discussion of kibbutzes was written relatively early in Arendt’s political writings; in

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<sup>118</sup> Hannah Arendt. “To Save The Jewish Homeland” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 395.

<sup>119</sup> Hannah Arendt. “Zionism Reconsidered” in *The Jewish Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007, 349.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 395.

the 1940s. She did not apparently write extensively on them again, so one can assume that her opinion must have changed, but the point can be witnessed in her attitude towards self-expression and the public realm. It also illustrates a tension in Arendt's thought in that her own optimism stemmed from self-expression amongst the Jewish people solely in an isolated community that started anew, not in the realities of the time. One could then ask her if she truly believed integration was possible, or did she believe that it was futile and that Jews must begin anew in a community isolated from the rest of society.

Nevertheless, in terms of politics in general, Arendt believed that the commonality of the public realm is a fragile defense against tyranny. Natality was continually christened here, and exhibited the most human capacity: to begin anew, as well as to live and die. In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt described natality as the event of "human beings being born anew."<sup>121</sup> In the *Human Condition*, Arendt went further in linking this metaphysical phenomenon to politics in that she described natality as a "miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs...it is in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence, which Greek antiquity ignored altogether, discounting the keeping of faith as a very uncommon and not too important virtue and counting hope among the evils of illusions in Pandora's box."<sup>122</sup> It should be noted that in *Between Past and Future*, Arendt acknowledged the peril in imbuing natality with such weight when she wrote that "...no single act, and no single

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<sup>121</sup> Arendt (1955), 174.

<sup>122</sup> Arendt (1958), 247.

event, can ever, once and for all, deliver and save a man, a nation, or mankind.”<sup>123</sup> Thus we can see Arendt’s urgent call for natality to be continually accessed.

#### SPEECH AND ACTION; LABOUR AND WORK

In terms of human potential, natality is expressed through speech and action, which Arendt called the “articulation of natality.”<sup>124</sup> Action and speech are the capacities that heighten the human existence from simply biological beings subjected to life and death, to thinking and feeling beings that are able to intervene in this life and death cycle with intentions and aspirations.

In addressing the phenomenon of natality, it is important to acknowledge a peculiarity related to Arendt’s denial of a knowable human nature. Arendt specifically denied a human nature, and instead posits a human *condition*, but in the book the *Human Condition*, Arendt made a relatively close approach to defining human nature when she addressed action and speech. These capacities, she wrote, raise human beings above animals, but human beings are still limited by the unavoidable biological reality of death. As she wrote, human affairs governed solely by this reality of fatality are doomed. In order for human affairs to shirk this impending doom and rise above it, the “faculty of action” is a necessary miracle that allows man to “begin something anew.”<sup>125</sup>

The human condition is also unavoidably defined by, and grounded by, the pain and effort inherent in existing in the world. This reality leads man to seek transcendence from these burdens, which can both alienate him, but can also create feelings of “vitality and liveliness” if he is able to shoulder this “burden,” and “toil and trouble of life.” So such is another quality Arendt assigned to man, which verges on a component of human

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<sup>123</sup> Arendt (1955), 168.

<sup>124</sup> Arendt (1958) 246.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 246.

nature: he is able to overcome biological burdens, at least temporarily, through sheer willpower. And while willpower is not exclusive to man (animals surely exhibit will), it is the creativity of expression associated with plurality through action that raises him above the animal kingdom.

In further exploring action, it is useful to explore Arendt's definition of the associated human capacities of labor and work. The discussion of labor and work centers on Arendt's self-admittedly unorthodox distinction between the two. This was in comparison to the ancient distinction between craftsmanship and manual labor that tended to only biological necessities.<sup>126</sup> To further refine the distinction, Arendt differentiated between productive and unproductive labor. First though, the definition of labor was for Arendt that it "leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent."<sup>127</sup> Engaged in this urgent effort is the animal laborans ("a worldless" creature "driven by his body"), as opposed to the homo faber, who is engaged in work.<sup>128</sup> The animal laborans can be granted freedom only through producing something as a result of his or her labor. This capacity "for making, fabricating and producing...eases the pain and trouble of laboring, but also erects a world of durability," Arendt wrote.<sup>129</sup>

The products of work are uniquely human, and "guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all." The products, therefore, of work, are derived from the human capacity for action and speech, and "constitute the

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 236.



fabric of human relationships and affairs.”<sup>130</sup> These are unique, diverse, and infinite, and they are products of action and speech generated by the human condition of plurality; and man’s capacity for new beginnings.

#### FORGIVENESS AND PROMISES AS REMEDY

Action-and the inherent plurality of the world- are also fraught with peril because it presupposes freedom to start anew, which can generate unwanted results, ie conflict with one another, or the trading off of one’s freedom to avoid such conflict. As a result, action means constant “trespassing” upon one another, or in Arendt’s words, “constant establishment of new relations within a web of relations.”<sup>131</sup> Indeed, Arendt suggested that modern notions of freedom mean that no man can ever be sovereign, as the human condition of living in the world is living in a plurality. So in addition to the formulation of forgiveness and promises that will be discussed shortly, Arendt suggested that one can maintain one’s sovereignty by abstaining from participating in human affairs.<sup>132</sup> But obviously, this is neither realistic, nor desirable, so Arendt proceeded to discuss forgiveness and promises as possible salves to such friction.

Forgiveness evokes the past moments in which action was realized. Action, in this light, is irreversible, as Arendt said. In the context of the discussion of work and labor, in which man receives redemption through producing a useful product, or through speech and action, forgiveness centers on the “potentiality” of action.<sup>133</sup> This redemptive quality of forgiveness does not flow from a divine source, but rather, from the very source from which the inherent irreversibility and unpredictability originate. As Arendt wrote, “The

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 95

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 234.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 237.

remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose ‘sins’ hang like Democles’ sword over every new generation; and the other binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men.”

Therefore, forgiveness frees man from the past and allows one to escape eternal condemnation to one act. Promises, then, grant identity by tying one to the future. Promises rescue man, both individually and socially, from the “darkness of the human heart” and its unpredictability in terms of how fellow human beings will react.<sup>134</sup> Natality hides here as the foundation, as a tacit acknowledgement of the eternal capacity to begin anew, which grants man the capacity to promise. Forgiveness and promises are also responses to necessity; they imply that human beings can counter necessity by reacting and overcoming the endless cycle of becoming.<sup>135</sup>

However, Arendt revealed a previously held lack of faith in politics in the *Jewish Writings* when she indicated that political contracts and treaties (while specific acknowledgements of the past and future) ignore the unpredictability and unreliability of human conduct. As a result, they “lose their binding power and the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating.” Arendt’s discussion of political promises prompts a reflection on the portion of *Jewish Writings* that addresses the potential of the spirit of a community and spontaneous action. She wrote that when people gather together and “act in concert,”

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 246.

they preserve public space with the “force of mutual promise or contract.” This can grant a measure of sovereignty to a people, even those who are not completely free, she wrote. This is because sovereignty, in that it ignores plurality, is a spurious or false claim for Arendt. If we translate this to analyze the *Jewish Writings*, we can see that Arendt viewed the Jews as having complete freedom since they were stateless, and thus unbound from a specific state’s rules.

This modern configuration, in which human relations are subject to a sort of code of conduct, are actually devoid of any traditional foundation, be it divine or metaphysical. Instead, Arendt remained true to her formulation of natality and its inherent plurality as the basis for guiding human relations. As a result, forgiving and promising play a major role in politics by establishing a “diametrically different set of guiding principles from the most ‘moral’ standards inherent in the notion of Platonic rule.”<sup>136</sup> Platonic rule, for Arendt, meant a society governed primarily by adherence to right and wrong as dictated by one’s relationship with oneself, which was translated to the public realm as “man writ large”. In other words, men endeavoring to achieve a healthy soul would encourage a healthy city.<sup>137</sup>

In contrast, this Kantian (and strictly secular, she was quick to clarify) “moral code,” Arendt wrote, is based on respecting the plurality of society. It is a recognition of an individual’s capacity to act and speak in the context of a society, therefore “the extent and modes of being forgiven and being promised determine the extent and modes in which one may be able to forgive himself or keep promises concerned only with himself.” For Arendt, morality is a construct of tradition, and arises out of a natural

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 237.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 238.

human desire to speak and act, to appear and recognize one another.

In light of the *Jewish Writings*, in which Arendt addressed seemingly unforgivable trespasses against millions of human beings, her discussion in the *Human Condition* of forgiveness becomes even more salient and revealing. Vengeance and revenge, although natural human responses, traps man in the past by tying him to the original transgression- "...everybody remains bound to the process..." she wrote.<sup>138</sup> This is why forgiveness frees man, and we can see here the underpinning of natality, since forgiveness is "unexpected...unpredictable and unconditioned by the act" and therefore "acts anew."

It follows that punishment is an alternative to forgiveness, but this is insufficient for achieving or maintaining an element of freedom, Arendt believed. This is because, again, punishment would tie man to the act, especially in the case of Kant's "radical evil." This type of evil is unforgivable, therefore un-punishable, so resides outside of the realm of human affairs. It is at this point that Arendt evoked Jesus' formulation of forgiving the person (the *who* and *what* they perpetrated) through respect.<sup>139</sup> This respect is gleaned from acknowledging the public space between one another. It should be noted that Arendt mourned a lack of common respect, and asserted that the modern world granted it only to those society deemed worthy of respect or esteem.

## ANALYSIS

Up to this point, I have attempted to reconstruct Arendt's political philosophy as exhibited in the *Human Condition*. It is a political philosophy that aims at the ideal of preserving natality as that which can constantly recreate freedom through speech and

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 242.

action in the public realm. In contrast, the *Jewish Writings* serves as a real-world example of what occurs when people are not able or willing to exercise their ability to act in the public sphere. Their freedom, or to use the terminology of the *Human Condition*, their natality, is effectively quashed. *Jewish Writings* was written by the political journalist Arendt, as opposed to the political philosopher Arendt who wrote the *Human Condition*. *Jewish Writings* outlines Arendt's speculation on why the Jewish people of Europe met the fate they did. Perhaps consequently, she turned to metaphysics to try to piece together both an explanation in the *Human Condition* and subtle prescriptive suggestions aimed at preventing not only the dehumanization and mass executions of the Holocaust, but another totalitarian regime from taking power.

At this point, I will further unpack the philosophical thought that is both apparent, and not so apparent, in the *Jewish Writings* and how it appears in the *Human Condition*. I have determined that there are two categories in which philosophical discussion can be rooted out in the *Jewish Writings*: ideals (freedom and justice) and politics (spontaneous actions such as the kibbutzes and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; and goals such as the normalization of Jewish politics). While Arendt maintained an action-oriented approach to discussing these matters in the *Jewish Writings*, some philosophy seeps through, which is an even more illuminating means of determining her political philosophy in this work and how it traces through to the *Human Condition*.

As Arendt indicated in the *Jewish Writings*, freedom and justice are the ideals at which all humans, especially the Jews, should aim. This is a sweeping statement, to be sure, but one can see more explicitly what Arendt meant by this in the *Human Condition*. Freedom is man's realized ability to begin anew, specifically to act and speak in the

public realm. It is also man's emancipation from necessity. But in light of the *Jewish Writings*, perhaps Arendt's most revealing comments on freedom appear at the end of the *Human Condition*. Political freedom is necessary to encourage thought, which she called the most vulnerable of human capacities. Remaining faithful to her notion of plurality informing the *Human Condition* of politics, she said that thought is available to everyone, and original, action without thought is most likely in a tyranny.<sup>140</sup>

So it is possible to trace the ambiguous notion of freedom in the *Jewish Writings* to a more sculpted and developed notion of freedom in the *Human Condition*, which is natality. For Arendt, witnessing the slow and gradual dissolution of freedom that culminated in the Holocaust formed for her the notion of natality. At its core, natality manifests itself in two fashions: first, the individual experience of exercising one's freedom to act and speak, which is to show oneself to one's fellow human beings. The second aspect, then, addresses the plurality of the *Human Condition*, which Arendt defined as the political and social realms.

The failure to express oneself in public spaces results in the tyranny of exclusion from the plurality of the *Human Condition*, and the formation of a dehumanized mass of people. As Arendt wrote in *Origins of Totalitarianism*: "The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and foremost and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective."<sup>141</sup>

In contemplating Arendt's emphasis on freedom as exhibited in natality, some major questions are raised that speak to the seemingly unavoidable paradoxes and contradictions raised early in this thesis, and in politics and human relations as a whole.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 324.

<sup>141</sup> Arendt (1955), 313.

These questions relate to thought and action, and thus, politics and philosophy. Arendt repeatedly urged people to think what they are doing.<sup>142</sup> This statement is so simple that it immediately prompts curiosity. Why should we think what we are doing? For how long? For every action? With who and what in mind? To what end? This last question is perhaps the most salient. What end does Arendt have in mind when she insisted that one think what they are doing? Does she indeed prescribe thoughtful action with an end in mind? I suspect she doesn't, as she is loathe to conflate means with ends in politics and action. However, a rigorous demand to consistently think what one is doing in itself points to an ideal: consistently thoughtful action.

This seems problematic on several levels: this is not practical, and seems to be potentially paralyzing; part of the *Human Condition* (natality) is inherently biological (we are physical beings, teleologically aimed at survival), therefore we are ruled by instinct and cannot consistently avoid action that is not spontaneous and condition by instinct; equality (of mental and physical ability) is not part of the *Human Condition*, and as a result, we are not all capable of consistent, thoughtful action. However, I would argue that this is beside the point; the philosophy undergirding Arendt's insistence on thoughtful action is merely an ideal. This is the point, though, in addressing the paradox of Arendt's urgings: to ask that thought consistently precede action is a tall order.

She heightened this tall order by calling for this thought to be unaccompanied by tradition. She urged us to "think without banisters."<sup>143</sup> But one can then ask: how do we shirk tradition and authority? How do we not meet ourselves and our predecessors when we engage in thoughts that are affected by our surroundings and the information we

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<sup>142</sup> Arendt (1958)

<sup>143</sup> Bowen-Moore, (1989), 161.

receive? Is this even possible, and is it necessary every time one goes to act? Isn't an insistence on the necessity of thought an ideal, or an end in itself, with thought being the means? Has Arendt not conflated thought and action herself? I believe she rescues this formulation with natality-man's eternal ability to begin anew. But herein lies more contradiction and paradox. Natality presupposes unpredictability, and therefore, danger. It is a risky enterprise every time a human being acts, as in a plurality one can never predict how one's fellows will react. To this end, Arendt spent much time on forgiveness and promises as antidotes to the messy reality of plurality and its potentially corrosive effect on human relations.

This plurality and constant chaos of colliding opinions and wills is the reason human beings established political institutions and regimes. In the *Jewish Writings*, Arendt showed a hostile, yet justified distaste for these political institutions, which clearly failed humanity. However, she does not completely renounce the human capacity to engage with one another peacefully, and even hopefully. Witness her inclusion of the concepts of freedom and justice appear as ideals at which human beings should aim in the *Jewish Writings*, albeit they are loosely defined.

At this point, in order to get a grip on the political philosophy Arendt crafted, it is helpful to turn to a discussion of action in the *Human Condition*. But in turning to this discussion, which does draw out these concepts more, we can see why Arendt was so reluctant to first define a human nature, and second to lay a foundation on which human nature can seek to improve itself as a collective. To explain this reluctance, Arendt turned to the ancients and their conflation of making and doing in the political realm. For Arendt, when the ancient primacy of contemplation of an ideal was carried over into



politics in the modern age, this conflated means and ends. This is dangerous (in fact, it results in “murderous consequences”<sup>144</sup>) because then all means are permissible if they are efficient, she wrote. But escaping the discussion of means without referring to ends is a paradox; an impossibility, she added, which indicates “perplexities.” The point, for Arendt, is that someone will always regard politics in terms of means and ends, and that this inevitably leads to tyranny and dangerous outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

In this section on the *Human Condition* and the *Jewish Writings*, I have tried to link them together in terms of a political philosophy, and I have tried to illustrate her transition from political journalist to political philosopher. I have tried to argue that Arendt’s transition ultimately shows her belief in a fundamental necessity for human beings to strive for ideals, especially times of political crisis, but that the capacity of human beings to act anew takes precedence over this striving for ideals. As I have tried to show, if human beings fail to act, their natality is lost (although not permanently), and thus freedom is gradually eroded. Freedom and justice are natural outcomes of natality, if it is maintained in both the public and private realms in the form of expression and appearance through speech and action.

I also have attempted to show that Arendt’s natality illustrates the tension between politics and philosophy and thought and action: in order to maintain natality (freedom), one ideally precludes action with thought. This tension exists because this is an ideal, it is not always possible, but it is always available, thus creating a demand on human beings to achieve a balance in response to this tension. One cannot always think before one acts, nor is this always necessary, but as a human being, one always has action

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<sup>144</sup> Arendt, (1958), 229

free of thought available to him or her.

By its very essence, natality can never be obliterated as a human capacity, but it can be discouraged in the public realm to the point that individuality gradually disappears. One of the worst consequences of this was the concentration camps. Therefore, as a remedy to a society in which natality cannot be exercised publicly, Arendt constructed an answer to the horrific results of the treatment of Jews in particular, and in general, to return and redefine the concept of freedom to a society overturned by unthinkable events. This society had created a new type of human being and new types of tyrannical leaders, which stripped away basic dignity. Thus, for Arendt, it was necessary to start anew.

For while hope was, for the most part, lost, the ability to begin anew never disappeared. Even in the concentration camps, a shred of dignity remained among a group of prisoners who accessed their ability to start anew and challenge those who attempted to eliminate their humanity. Arendt also saw natality in the kibbutz movements and the salons as previously described in the *Jewish Writings*.

Given her insistence on starting anew, and her rejection of the status quo, one could question whether a blank slate for society would be appropriate. After all, if one is careening down a staircase with no banisters, one is likely to at least stumble, if not fall off altogether. This is indeed a danger that a lack of banisters, or tradition, or the structure of traditional politics as a safeguard of freedom, could lead to the chaos of a return to nature, or a free-for-all in which man attempts to survive at all costs. This could indeed prove to be murderous mayhem, but from Arendt's point of view, it appears she saw no worse alternative than the society that produced the concentration camps. She demanded

a fresh start grounded on natality and thoughtful action, which she believed would presuppose freedom and justice.

In addition to situating natality as a remedy to a loss of freedom and justice, Arendt addressed the absolute failure of politics to protect these ideals of a modern society. Arendt's rejection of tradition as a guide for thought is evident in her lack of faith in modern politics, as well as her stubborn dismissal of the existence of a human nature. If no identifiable human nature exists, politics for human beings as a plurality is hopeless. However, her notion of natality circumvents this problem by grounding human relations in something universal, undeniable and eternal, which is as close to declaring a knowable human nature as she gets.

Considering Arendt's personal experiences, her loss of hope and faith in politics, and rejection of tradition make sense. However, she in fact experienced an almost complete reversal in that she returned to ideals, and a metaphysical remedy to the horrific events she witnessed. Arendt appeared to appeal to ideals and found in humanity a seed of commonality-natality- within the chaotic plurality that could ground man and start anew. This appeal to ideals, however, is tempered by her insistence on the maintenance of action to "save" the world, thus illustrating the tension between thought and action and politics and philosophy.

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