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Chapter 9

The (Meta)politics of Thinking:

On Arendt and the Greeks

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In the most general terms, Hannah Arendt's intellectual project can be characterized as a sustained attempt to render comprehensible the totalitarian disasters of the twentieth century by situating them historically within the framework of the Western tradition of political thought as a whole. The philosophical indebtedness of this project to Martin Heidegger, while considerable, should not be overemphasized.¹ Heidegger was Arendt's first academic teacher in philosophy and left an ineradicable mark on her general approach to philosophy, but she only spent three semesters with him in Marburg in 1924–6, attending just three of his lecture courses—*Plato's Sophist* (1924–5), *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena* (1925), and *Logic: The Question of Truth* (1925–6)—as well as his seminars on Descartes's *Meditations*, Hegel's *Logic*, and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Briefe*, 27/18, 50/37, 268/222, 276/228). Karl Jaspers, with whom she finished her dissertation in Heidelberg, was an equally important influence, and in many ways, Arendt was also an intellectual autodidact. During the most formative years of her independent career, from 1933 until 1950, her personal contact with Heidegger was broken.

Nonetheless, we can distinguish two main aspects of Heidegger's work that did have a particular impact on Arendt's thought. In a 1969 essay written for Heidegger's eightieth birthday she recalls the electrifying effect of Heidegger's early phenomenological readings of ancient philosophy, which she was able to follow *in situ* during his 1924–5 reading of Plato's *Sophist* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*Briefe*, 181–2/151). An underlying Heideggerian

¹ For extensive comparative studies of Heidegger and Arendt, see Villa (1995); Taminioux (1997); Benhabib (2003, 102–22); Wolin (2001); Sosnowska (2019).

element in the whole of Arendt's project is her strongly historical approach to her key questions: her method can be characterized as *hermeneutic* in the sense that it tends to interpret our contemporary modes of thinking and ways of conceptualizing in terms of the Western philosophical tradition, and *phenomenological* in the sense that it seeks to trace this tradition back to the initial (Greek) experiences underlying it.² This approach is manifested already in Arendt's 1929 doctoral dissertation on love in Augustine: here, Arendt seeks to make "explicit what Augustine himself merely implied" and to "grasp what lies beneath" the contradictions in Augustine's text, rather than to integrate them into a total system (*LA*, 2/4, 6/7). The same approach underpins the quest, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), to identify "the subterranean stream of Western history [that] has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition" (*Totalitarianism*, ix). It is continued in the historical analysis of *The Human Condition* (1958) that aims to "trace back modern world alienation . . . to its origins" and focuses explicitly on the beginnings of Greek political philosophy (*THC*, 6).

In her 1969 essay, Arendt also points to the discovery of Nietzsche's metaphysics of the will to power as the completion and end of the modern metaphysics of subjectivity, which she regards as a key insight of the later Heidegger (*Briefe*, 191/161). Arendt later studied this insight in detail in volume 2 of *The Life of the Mind*, entitled *Willing* (*Mind* 2, 172–94). In *Between Past and Future* (1961), in a manner strongly reminiscent of the later Heidegger's historical narrative of the Greek beginning and the contemporary end of metaphysics as the beginning and end of a "history of being," Arendt describes the Western tradition of political philosophy as beginning with the Platonic attempt to impose philosophical standards upon public life and ending with the Marxist conversion of political philosophy into a revolutionary movement of social transformation (*Past*, 17–18; cf. *Promise*, 81–92). Just as the end of metaphysics does not mean the dissolution of metaphysical thinking for Heidegger, but rather its consummation in a postphilosophical late modern period of manipulative, administrative, and instrumentalizing technicity, so the contemporary end of political philosophy does not signify an end to the "world-alienation" of political philosophy for Arendt, but rather the culmination of this alienation in modern mass society and in ideological social engineering which, in its extreme totalitarian form, threatens to destroy the communal human world of common sense and shared tradition altogether.

² On the hermeneutic and phenomenological aspects of Arendt's thought, see Bernasconi (2002); Novák (2010); Borren (2013); Vasterling (2015); Loidolt (2018). For discussions of Arendt's engagement with ancient philosophy, see Cassin (1990); Euben (2000); Taminioux (2000); Tsao (2002); Backman (2007); Backman (2010); Leonard (2018a, 2018b); Connolly (2018); Cavarero (2019); Sheffield (2019).

In this chapter, I will approach Arendt's readings of ancient Greek philosophy from the point of view of this Heideggerian tendency to look at the twentieth-century intellectual situation of the West as an end and outcome of the tradition issuing from the Greek beginning of philosophy. I will highlight two principal features of her exchange with the Greeks. The first one is her account, primarily found in *The Human Condition*, of the profound transformation of the Greek perceptions of political life and political action at the beginning of the Platonic tradition of political philosophy, a transformation resulting in the philosophical depreciation of politics as the realm of plurality and appearance and in an instrumentalization of politics that could be characterized as *metapolitical*, in the sense that politics is now subjugated by philosophy to a higher end that itself lies above and beyond the political realm. The second feature is Arendt's distinction, in the unfinished and posthumously published *The Life of the Mind*, between three different points of departure for the activity of thinking—wonder, fear, and conscience—and three different outcomes of this activity—contemplation, willing, and judging, all of which are initially discovered by classical Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. What connects these two interpretations of ancient philosophy, I will argue, is the attempt to rearticulate the complex relationship between thinking and action, or, more generally, between the reflective *vita contemplativa* and the world-oriented activities of the *vita activa*.

1. Plato against Pericles: The Beginning of Political Philosophy

After the 1951 publication of the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—which, as Arendt herself pointed out (*Essays*, 403), was concerned not so much with “origins” as with various *elements* “crystallizing” in totalitarianism, particularly in its Nazi version: anti-Semitism, imperialism, racism, and the modern mass society—Arendt's work became increasingly focused on the specific features inherent in the Western tradition of political thought underlying the political phenomena of the twentieth century. In a 1953 essay, later appended to the second edition of *Totalitarianism* (460–79), she analyzes the radically ideological nature of totalitarian domination that distinguished it from all earlier forms of government. Arendt also contemplated a book on the proto-totalitarian elements in Marxism, which she began to regard as the point of transition from political philosophy into ideological politics, or, in the words of Marx's famous 1845 thesis on Feuerbach, from the (Hegelian) process of merely interpreting the world philosophically to the process of its (ideological) transformation (Kohn 2005, vii;

Promise, 74–5, 86; cf. Marx and Engels 1978/1976, 7/5). This concern with the end of the tradition soon precipitated reconsiderations of its Greek beginning with Socrates and Plato, which Arendt came to see as a profound break with the *polis* culture of classical Athens, embodied by the illustrious fifth-century BCE statesman Pericles (*Promise*, 5–39, 130–5). This further led to a far-reaching reflection on the original existential significance of politics and the public realm of the *polis*, which Arendt believed philosophers came to denigrate and overlook, partly due to the gradual decline of Athens after the Peloponnesian War and to the trial and death of Socrates (*Promise*, 26). Her basic thesis concerning this change is outlined in her *Denktagebuch* in August 1953:

Plato and Aristotle signify the end of Greek philosophy under the conditions of the declining *polis*. Not only their political philosophy but their entire philosophy—including the doctrine of ideas and the *bios theōretikos*—is to be understood only thus. Their fundamental question is: How can the human being live without a *polis*, or, how can the *polis* be reorganized in such a manner that one can live in it outside it? This subsequently became the basic stance of all political philosophy. (*Denktagebuch*, 423; my translation)

This thesis is elaborated in *The Human Condition* (a title imposed by the publisher on Arendt, who had preferred that of the German edition, *Vita active* [*Mind* 1, 6]), first published in 1958. *The Human Condition* can be read as a phenomenological study of *action*, understood by Arendt as the particular kind of human activity that is undertaken neither for the sake of bringing about a product external to the activity itself, as in *work* or *making*, nor for the sake of mere necessity and survival, as in *labor*, but fundamentally for the sake of its own intrinsic “aesthetic” quality, the “greatness” of the action itself (*THC*, 7–8, 205–6). While the distinction between work and action is modeled on the Aristotelian distinction between *poiēsis* and *praxis*, Arendt emphasizes that it does not simply correspond to Aristotle’s understanding of this distinction according to which *poiēsis*, production, is an activity that has its end outside itself whereas in *praxis*, action proper, the activity is its own end (*THC*, 196; *Promise*, 46).³ Aristotelian *praxis* is, like *poiēsis*, still essentially a teleological activity performed by a single agent, a kind of perfect “production” that is always already complete—in the sense of Aristotle’s *entelecheia*, of already having attained its end, *telos*—and thus immune to failure. It is symptomatic that Aristotle’s key examples of

³ For the *poiēsis/praxis* distinction in Aristotle, see *EN* (6.5.1140b6–7).

perfect *praxis* are “theoretical” activities such as seeing and contemplating.⁴ Arendtian action, by contrast, is essentially a collective venture into which others are invited to join, which makes it inherently open-ended, unfinished, and incomplete (*THC*, 190–2, 233, 237, 243–7). Since the ends of an action or deed in this sense are potentially infinite and uncontrollable, it is judged not by its success, not in terms of its end, *telos*, but in terms of its *beginning*, its inherent initial principle or *arkhē* (*THC*, 177–8, 189, 206). From this point of view, the outcome of the Trojan War was ultimately irrelevant to the greatness of the deeds of the Greeks as well as those of the Trojan defenders, immortalized by Homer’s *Iliad*, an important cultural paradigm of the classical age; what is celebrated are the excellences or virtues manifested by these deeds themselves, the particular valor, prudence, magnanimity, or reverence made tangible in them (*THC*, 205). To use a less mythical example, the heroic last stand of Leonidas and the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae during the Greco-Persian Wars, another Greek model of military excellence commemorated by Herodotus (Hdt. 7.175–239) and the poet Simonides (*PMG* 531), was a “glorious failure” that ended in Persian victory.

Action, consisting in memorable deeds and words, is for Arendt also the primary human activity that involves the self-disclosure of the agent in person, that is, in her irreplaceable individual singularity: even the celebration of collective undertakings such as the Trojan War was focalized around individual heroes like Achilles and Odysseus (*THC*, 175–83). By contrast, labor, mere toil for the sake of necessity, is in many ways analogous to a physiological process like metabolism—a monotonous, anonymous, life-sustaining process whose fruits are immediately consumed (*THC*, 96–109). The production of excellent works may demonstrate rare and exceptional talent, but is still, in principle, a rule-based and “technical” activity in which the singular “who” of the author is not disclosed as such (*THC*, 156–7, 180–1, 186, 210–11, 227)—and for the ancients, this applied even to works that modernity sees as instances of creative “fine art,” as is shown by Aristotle’s *Poetics* with its very technical analysis of the aims of tragic poetry and of the appropriate means for realizing them. Action is the narrative material of biographies, the stuff that individual human life stories—which alone preserve the individual “who”—are made of and that allows humans to transcend the “vanity of vanities,” bemoaned by the Biblical Ecclesiastes, of biological life in its endless and aimless cycle of birth,

⁴ For Aristotle on *entelekhēia*, see *Met.* (Θ.8.1050a21–3). Note, however, that Arendt (*THC*, 206–7) compares her notion of action to Aristotle’s concept of *energeia*, actuality, referring to “complete” activities that are “ends in themselves” (see *Met.* Θ.6.1048a25–b36, Θ.8.1049b4–9.1051a33; cf. *Phys.* 3.2.201b27–33). She here mistakenly takes the term *energeia ateleis* (incomplete actuality or unfinished actualization, Aristotle’s technical term for *kinēsis*, movement or process) to mean that actuality as such is “without *telos*,” without an end, thus suggesting that Aristotle’s understanding of *energeia* is not teleological. On this, see Backman (2010, 28–47).

reproduction, and decay, of the rise and fall of ever new generations (*THC*, 96–8, 185–6, 204). This existential significance of action was, Arendt maintains, appreciated by classical antiquity to a greater extent than by any subsequent epoch in Western history. However, structurally speaking, action is extremely frail. The actualization of the inherent quality of words and deeds is essentially dependent on the recognition and judgment of others—actions are nothing more than what they appear to others to be—and therefore this quality remains in existence only as long as it is remembered by others, and is constantly threatened by oblivion (*THC*, 94–5, 173–4, 188–99, 204). The main lasting thing that action leaves behind are stories. For this reason, action and, with it, the individuality of the individual, are generally dependent on works and lasting monuments: in the long term, the greatness of great deeds is preserved first and foremost in narratives produced by poets, historians, and biographers. This structural fragility makes the attainment and maintenance of immortal fame—which, according to the ideal voiced by Heraclitus (DK 22 B29), the most excellent ones (*aristoi*) prefer to all other things—rare, haphazard, and precarious.

The Arendtian hermeneutic and phenomenological “genealogy” of the classical political culture of the Greeks maintains that—regardless of the concrete historical circumstances surrounding the establishment of particular political communities—the Greeks attributed to the classical *polis* first and foremost an existential significance, seeing it as a way to remedy the frailty of intersubjective recognition (*THC*, 192–9). According to this account, the increasing replacement in the Greek classical era of local kings and tyrants by polities constructed around a public sphere of equal rights and liberties for all free male citizens—originally characterized by Herodotus (Hdt. 3.80) not as *dēmokratia*, popular rule, but as *isonomia*, equality of norms (*Revolution*, 30–1; *Promise*, 118, 123–4)—was rooted in a desire to create a framework of institutionalized remembering that would multiply opportunities to be seen and recognized in public. The *polis* relegated labor and other biological and economic necessities to the private sphere of the household, the *oikos*, to which women and slaves were as a rule restricted, and left work to specialized artisans. It thus cleared its *agora*, its political arena of free gathering and appearance, as a venue for the citizens’ agonistic rivalry for distinction, honor, and power—power, however, not primarily in the sense of rulership and coercion but in the sense of prestige and influence through persuasion (*THC*, 28–37, 50–8, 199–207). Protected by “prepolitical” structures—by walls and, when necessary, by military strength from external enemies, and by honored customs and laws from internal transgressions by citizens—the classical *polis*,

paradigmatically exemplified by Athens, was a kind of civic Olympia, a permanent site for an ongoing competitive demonstration of individual excellence in word and deed.

To what extent such a political ideal was ever a political reality, and to what extent it was even culturally shared, are, of course, heavily debatable questions.⁵ Arendt's textual evidence for her understanding of the classical *polis* ideal is somewhat limited. Her main ancient sources are here the great fifth-century historians, Herodotus, who wrote his *Histories* of the Greco-Persian Wars "in order that . . . great and marvelous deeds [*erga*], some performed by the Greeks, some by the barbarians, not lose their fame" (Hdt. 1.0) and Thucydides.⁶ The latter's *History of the Peloponnesian War* includes a "Funeral Oration" (Thuc. 2.35–46), purportedly relating a speech delivered by Pericles during the first year of the Peloponnesian War (431/0 BCE) in honor of the fallen Athenians, which Arendt reads as a summary *par excellence* of the prephilosophical conception of the *polis* (THC, 197–8, 205–6; cf. *Past*, 72, 213–14, 217, 219; *Mind* 1, 133, 178; *Denktagebuch*, 435; *Promise*, 10, 124, 172). Here, Pericles starts off by noting that the honors (*timai*) of those who have become excellent (*agathoi*) through their deeds (*ergoi*) should also be manifested (*dēlousthai*) by deeds, that is, by the public funeral rites and orations (Thuc. 2.35). He goes on to present his own views on the constitution (*politeia*) and the ways (*tropoi*)—the written and unwritten norms (*nomoi*)—that have made the *polis* of the Athenians great (2.36–7). What particularly distinguishes Athens from her principal enemy, Sparta, where male citizens lead a collective life of military training, is the fact that her citizens attend to both private (*oikeia*) and public or political (*politika*) matters, that public participation is expected of everyone who does not want to risk appearing "useless" (*akbreios*), and that discourses (*logoi*) are deemed as important as deeds (*erga*) and indispensable to the latter (2.40). "Our power [*dynamis*] will not be without witness," Pericles goes on, "and far from needing a Homer to sing our praises . . . we have forced every sea and land to be the avenue of our daring, and everywhere we have established reminders [*mnēmeia*] of our deeds, whether worthless [*kakōn*] or excellent [*agathōn*]" (2.41). The most distinctive (*episēmotatos*) tombstone for the fallen heroes, in which "their repute [*doxa*] will remain forever remembered [*aieimnēstos*] upon every opportune occasion for word or deed," consists in the "unwritten record [*mnēmē*] of individual judgment [*gnōmēs*]" (2.43). In other words, unlike their heroic ancestors in the Trojan War, the Athenians are no longer dependent on the narratives of poets, which always lend themselves

⁵ For a critique of the Arendtian understanding of the Greek *polis*, especially the sharp distinction between the private and the public, the *oikos* and the *polis*, that she attributes to Greek thought, see, e.g., Ojakangas (2016, 49–50).

⁶ All translations of ancient authors are my own.

to doubt; the public sphere of the Athenian *polis* will, by itself, be capable of retaining the quality of illustrious words and deeds in permanent accessibility to the judgment and opinions of later generations.

However, the Thucydidean version of Pericles' panegyric turned out to be overly optimistic. While the glory of the Athenian *polis* has indeed proved lasting, this has nonetheless in many ways been thanks to the material monuments of its builders, sculptors, historians, and poets. As Arendt emphasizes, the golden age of the *polis* as a living framework for remembering proved, in the end, to be almost as ephemeral as the deeds and words it was designed to preserve (*THC*, 205). Pericles himself died in an epidemic not long after his purported oration, and the political life of Athens was given a lasting blow by Athens' ultimate defeat in the Peloponnesian War, the loss of its prestige, and the ensuing temporary oligarchy of the Thirty Tyrants; the city finally lost its classical freedom with the rise of Macedonian overlordship in the late fourth century. In Arendt's account, this decline of classical Athenian *polis* culture is accompanied by an intellectual and cultural change with gradual but extremely profound consequences: the birth of political philosophy.

Aristotle (*Met.* A.6.987b1–2, M.4.1078b17–19) suggests that the actual philosophical project of the historical Socrates was limited to *ta ēthika*, ethical matters related to the conduct of good human life, or *ēthikai aretai*, moral forms of excellence.⁷ Socrates, as we know him from the Platonic dialogues, is an eminently public figure, constantly seeking discourse and interaction with fellow citizens. His intellectual quest was concerned with the self-improvement of citizens; however, the approach and method he offered for this purpose differed decisively from that of the sophists of his day, professional intellectuals who generally represented a perspectival value relativism well in tune with the agonistic, discourse-oriented political atmosphere of the Athenian democracy and also taught instrumental rhetorical skills for the purpose of persuading one's peers to accept one's own opinions and judgments. Socrates, Aristotle (*Met.* A.6.987b2–4, M.4.1078b18–9, 27–31) tells us, was the first to take an interest in the general definitions or determinations (*horismoi*) of ethical concepts—in other words, in that on which everyone must ultimately agree in order for discourses and debates regarding ethics to be meaningful. For Socrates as he is painted by Plato (*Euthyd.* 278d–282a; *Meno* 87e–89a), the true key to virtue is knowledge (*epistēmē*) and understanding (*phronēsis*) of the universal

⁷ This interpretation of the historical Socrates (contrasting with that of Plato) as focused on ethics and virtue is supported by the testimony of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (3.9.5); in modern times it has been prominently advocated and developed by Gregory Vlastos (1991).

meanings of concepts, attainable not through judgments on the moral quality of individual deeds but through the dialectical analysis of intuitions shared by all, through the philosophical examination of one's own implicit presuppositions. The conception of political life and discourse entailed by such moral intellectualism deviated decisively from the agonistic, aesthetically oriented Athenian spirit, and the dire consequences of this deviation for Socrates, accused of irreverence towards the city's traditions and norms, and possibly also suspected of a Laconophile inclination towards the Spartan type of oligarchy (cf. *Pl., Cri.* 52e), are well-known. Socrates' trial and execution, thirty years after the death of Pericles and five years after the end of the Peloponnesian War, convinced many in his entourage, first and foremost Plato, of the ultimate incompatibility of intellectual autarky and the quest for general truths and essences with the plurality of judgments and opinions and the volatility of rhetorical persuasion in the public sphere (*THC*, 12; cf. *Past*, 107–8, 114; *Essays*, 428–9). To use a contemporary term, post-Socratic philosophers, in their passion for ultimate truth, became convinced of the fundamental “post-truth” character of politics.

Philosophy since Plato, in Arendt's rendering, was decisively shaped by this basic distrust of political plurality and “human affairs” in the sense of “that which takes place in the public space between humans.” From the point of view of philosophy, as Aristotle points out in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (10.7.1177a27–b1), the basic flaw of immortal fame as a way of transcending human transience was precisely its dependence on the fluctuating and unreliable opinions of others, in other words, its lack of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*). Plato and Aristotle therefore came up with an alternative source of (relative) immortality, namely, *eternity* in the sense of the everlasting immutability of necessary principles and the regular movement of the heavenly bodies (*THC*, 17–21). Such eternity is accessible to the human being in the activity of contemplation, *theōrein*, the disinterested beholding of beings for their own sake, in the light of their eternal principles, that is the culmination of philosophical thought (Arist., *EN* 10.7.1177a17–b26). However, eternity is so entirely uncharacteristic of human affairs that the contemplative way of life (*bios theōrētikos*)—identified by Aristotle as the form of free life that, because of its complete self-sufficiency, is superior to the life of mere enjoyment (*bios apolaustikos*) as well as the public or political life (*bios politikos*; *EN* 1.5.1095b14–1096a5)—is characterized by Aristotle as a “divine” rather than human or mortal *bios*, to the extent that it is based on the supreme and essentially “divine” capacity of the human soul, namely, the

(intuitive) intellect (*nous*; *EN* 10.7.1177b26–1178a8).⁸ Insofar as we lead a life of contemplation, we approach the divine self-sufficiency of God, defined by Aristotle (*Met.* Λ.9.1074b33–5) as a purely intellectual life of complete and perfect self-intellection (*noēsis noēseōs*), to the extent that this is humanly possible.

Since contemplation, an essentially solitary activity that requires extensive philosophical preparation, is the key human mode of access to the eternal and thus the highest pinnacle of human existence, and since the life of the philosopher is only possible in a well-organized political community providing its material basis and shelter, the political life and the philosophical life are related to each other hierarchically, in terms of means and ends (Arist., *EN* 6.7.1141a20–2, 6.13.1145a6–11). Politics thus becomes an ultimately instrumental activity whose fundamental aim is no longer the political life as such, but rather the creation of a framework for philosophy. In other words, politics ceases to be primarily a realm for manifesting excellence through public action, whose consequences are potentially infinite and uncontrollable, and becomes a process of producing a predetermined outcome. It is for this reason, Arendt argues, that political philosophy since Plato is inherently predisposed to conceive of politics in terms of ruling and governing—activities that, she claims, were fundamentally extrinsic to the Periclean ideal (*THC*, 222–7). The Platonic ideal republic is a polity governed by philosophers but ultimately ruled by truth itself, that is, by the ideal essences to which philosophers have dialectic access and whose implementation in the material realm they are eminently fit to supervise (*Past*, 246). In the Platonic model, philosophers become the master-craftspeople whose political task consists in presiding over the production of the political community in accordance with pre-established ideal models. As Socrates puts it in Plato’s *Republic* (*Resp.* 6.501a–b), philosophers “pick up the city and the manners of humans like a writing-tablet, wiping it clean . . . and after this, they sketch out the shape of the constitution [*politeias*],” and in doing this, they constantly “look both ways”: on the one hand, to the ideal forms of justice, beauty, temperance, and other virtues, to which they gain access through dialectic, and, on the other hand, to human affairs which they use as the material in which they implement (*empoiein*) a model human image (*andreikelon*) that can, with Homer, be called a divine image (*theoikelon*) that comes to be among human beings.⁹

Arendt concludes:

⁸ For a discussion of Aristotle’s “three lives” in relation to Heidegger’s interpretation of *prohairesis*, see ch. 3 in this volume.

⁹ In the *Iliad* (1.131, 19.155), *theoikelos*, “godlike,” is used as an epithet of Achilles.

[T]he greater part of political philosophy since Plato could easily be interpreted as various attempts to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics altogether. . . . The commonplace notion already to be found in Plato and Aristotle that every political community consists of those who rule and those who are ruled . . . rests on a suspicion of action rather than on a contempt for men, and arose from the earnest desire to find a substitute for action rather than from any irresponsible or tyrannical will to power. (*THC*, 222)

The Platonic technocratic-administrative model of politics, the “identification of knowledge with command and rulership and of action with obedience and execution . . . became authoritative for the whole tradition of political thought” (*THC*, 225). Reading, like Heidegger (*GA* 7, 170/166),¹⁰ Plato’s doctrine of the ideas as a “fabrication ontology” in which the ideas are ultimately the functions appropriate to each type of thing and provide the models for their material implementation, Arendt sees it as the metaphysical root of the long-standing tradition of substituting production, *poiēsis*, for action, which culminates in the Christian and modern notions that history is “made” rather than simply narrated in retrospect; the most extreme contemporary manifestation of this inherited notion is the totalitarian use of the ideological idea for the violent mobilization and transformation of society. This introduces a tone of warning into her analysis:

How persistent and successful the transformation of action into a mode of making has been is easily attested by the whole terminology of political theory and political thought, which indeed makes it almost impossible to discuss these matters without using the category of means and ends and thinking in terms of instrumentality. . . . We are perhaps the first generation which has become fully aware of the murderous consequences inherent in a line of thought that forces one to admit that all means, provided that they are efficient, are permissible and justified to pursue something defined as an end. . . . As long as we believe that we deal with ends and means in the political realm, we shall not be able to prevent anybody’s using all means to pursue recognized ends. (*THC*, 229)¹¹

¹⁰ For perspectives on Heidegger’s interpretation of the Aristotelian conception of being as based upon a “production” model, see ch. 2 and ch. 3 in this volume.

¹¹ Leo Strauss offers a related, but also significantly different account of the means-ends reasoning characteristic of late modernity; see ch. 7 in this volume.

2. Socrates against Eichmann: The Invention of Conscience

The later part of Arendt's career was in many ways defined by her preoccupation with the case of *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Adolf Eichmann, the chief Nazi official responsible for the logistics of the Holocaust, whose trial in Jerusalem she attended in 1961 and interpreted in her famous report *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). For Arendt, Eichmann was an exemplary manifestation of a new facet of totalitarian evil: its *banality*, that is, its impersonality and lack of individual motivation. Eichmann's crimes, she insisted, were committed neither out of sheer wickedness, malice, sadism, or a satanic "ill will," nor out of selfishness or pursuit of personal gain. Nor were they ultimately based on personal hatred or genuine ideological conviction. Rather, Eichmann was merely functioning within the totalitarian system on the presupposition of his complete replaceability; he simply chose to submit to total ideological mobilization and to abrogate his capacity to form independent opinions on his own activities, manifesting his desire to conform completely to his surroundings through the constant use of clichés. The only feature in the confounding "normality" of Eichmann that made any kind of impression on Arendt was his utter failure or refusal to *think* in the sense of reflecting and conversing with himself (*Eichmann*, 42, 48–9, 114, 136, 287–9; *Responsibility*, 159–60; *Mind 1*, 3–6). This encounter raised a new theoretical question for Arendt: How is action related to thinking and to other mental capacities, to the *vita contemplativa* she had expressly omitted to discuss in *The Human Condition*, which focuses exclusively on the *vita activa* (*THC*, 324–5)? What kind of thinking does authentic individual initiative and self-manifestation through action require, and how can thinking shield us from the banal evil of total conformism in situations of totalitarian mass mobilization, where communal institutions and traditions, as well as the communal "common sense" they involve, are largely abolished?

This is the question that Arendt poses, again to the philosophical tradition, in her final, unfinished, and posthumously published major work, *The Life of the Mind* (1978). Philosophy since Plato, she argues, placed thinking—in the sense of *discursive* thinking, *dianoia*, the soul's soundless dialogue with itself (Pl., *Soph.* 263e)—primarily at the service of knowledge and truth. Thinking was to be the pathway to contemplating eternal and divine principles and, later, to contemplating the Christian God as the Creator—or, since Descartes, a methodological pathway to rational certainty as the point of departure for all knowledge (*Mind 1*, 6–7). However, Kant's critical philosophy, with the severe restrictions it imposes on our ability to

attain knowledge by means of pure reasoning, makes room for other important functions: while our intellectual understanding (*Verstand*) is exclusively oriented to knowledge and truth, our discursive reason (*Vernunft*) in the wider sense also seeks *meaningfulness*, attempting to make *sense* of the world in terms of morality and aesthetics, goodness and beauty (*Mind 1*, 13–6, 53–65). Here, Arendt suggests, Kant is in fact rediscovering a main function of thinking in “prephilosophical” Greek culture, which she interprets with a reference to Homer’s *Odyssey* and Pindar: understanding and narrating, from a spectator’s (a poet’s or an historian’s) perspective, the meaning of human actions, which cannot be properly seen from the perspective of the involved agent herself (*Mind 1*, 129–41).¹² All this was left behind when the philosophers reoriented their theoretical enterprise towards unchanging truths, rather than transient human affairs. For Plato and Aristotle, the point of departure for thinking—that which makes us think—is *wonder* (*thaumazein*) in the sense of admiration, which can only be directed at that which is greater than us, ultimately, the *kosmos* as such, the totality of being. Thinking that starts from wonder inherently aims at contemplation, at an active theoretical understanding of reality as such in the light of immutable principles (*Mind 1*, 141–51).

Yet in addition to the Platonic-Aristotelian contemplative ideal, Arendt discovers, within the ancient philosophical tradition itself, two other starting points and two other outcomes or ends of thinking. One is the “Roman,” or rather Stoic, solution of the Hellenistic period, whose entire philosophy was regarded by Hegel (1986, 401–3/371–3) as an inward orientation of the individual “unhappy consciousness” towards itself, resulting from the loss of external political freedom (*Mind 1*, 151–66). This Hellenistic outlook, which sees thinking as a defense or consolation in the face of an overwhelmingly hostile, turbulent, and violent world, is represented by Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio” in the sixth book of his *De Re Publica*, by the former slave and Stoic philosopher Epictetus in the teachings compiled in his *Discourses* and *Enchiridion* (*Handbook*), and at the close of antiquity by Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. *Fear*, not admiring wonder, is here the driving force of thinking; rather than guiding us towards insights into the fundamental truths of the world, discursive reason gives us the power and means to negate the world in such a way that worldly vicissitudes cannot truly affect us. Thinking becomes a technique that enables us to accept the turns of fate that are not in our power and to control that which is in our power, namely, our world-oriented attitudes, expectations, and desires. In

¹² Arendt specifically refers to *Odyssey* 8.73–86, where Odysseus weeps upon hearing the blind singer Demodocus narrate Odysseus’s own quarrel with Achilles in Troy, and to Pindar’s lost hymn to Zeus, in which the other gods ask Zeus to create poets to beautify Zeus’s great works (discussed in Snell 2011/1953, 82–94/71–89).

the words of Epictetus (*Ench.* 8–9): “Do not demand the things that happen [*ginomena*] to happen as you wish [*theleis*], but wish the things that happen to happen as they do. . . . Disease is an impediment to the body, but not to the will [*prohairesēōs*], unless the will itself so chooses.” In this function, thinking is a pathway not to contemplation but to *willing* in the sense of commanding oneself—a faculty prefigured by the Aristotelian concept of *prohairesis*, preference, choice, or decision, but fully discovered by philosophy only in medieval times, in the theological context of questions concerning the role of God’s will in creation and of the human capacity to choose against the will of God (*Mind 1*, 155, 161, 213–15; *Mind 2*, 3–7, 11–9, 55–146).¹³ It is willing, as the intermediary stage between thinking and worldly action, that constitutes the topic of the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*.

The third possible starting point of thinking and its respective result have, according to Arendt, been largely ignored in the philosophical tradition. She deems this third answer to the question of what makes us think to be genuinely “Socratic,” in the sense of being the answer of the historical Socrates, arguably discernable in Plato’s supposedly early “Socratic” dialogues such as *Euthyphro*, *Ion*, and *Protagoras* (*Mind 1*, 166–79; cf. *Promise*, 5–39; *Responsibility*, 168–80).¹⁴ In these dialogues, the emphasis is on the transformative or protreptic aspect of Socrates’ public activity—later highlighted by the skeptical philosophers in Plato’s Academy—as a philosophical “gadfly” (*myōps*; Pl., *Ap.* 30e) or “midwife” (*maia*; Pl., *Tht.* 149a–151d) of thought. Socrates the gadfly does not really teach any doctrine of his own, and most often does not even attain any answers, but simply exhorts the Athenians to think, to examine their own discourses and reflect on their inherent presuppositions, rather than sticking to conventional and unexamined standards and customs. It seems to be Socrates’ conviction that striving for self-understanding, for an explicit grasp of what is in fact meant when one speaks of ethical phenomena like justice or reverence, is the key to moral self-improvement, even when a definitive answer is not attained: unjust deeds ultimately result from a lack of insight into what is meant by “justice.” It is the Socratic attempt to teach thinking as a practice of unending self-examination and of questioning established norms, seen by Socrates himself as the greatest good ever to befall the Athenians (Pl., *Ap.* 30a), that brought upon him charges of irreverence

¹³ For Aristotle on *prohairesis*, see, e.g., Arist. (*Phys.* 2.5.196b17–22; *Met.* Δ.1.1013a20–1, Δ.11.1018b22–6). For a discussion of Heidegger’s interpretation of this concept, see ch. 3 in this volume.

¹⁴ In spite of professing to “ignore” the controversy concerning the historical Socrates, Arendt states her “belief that there exists a sharp dividing line between what is authentically Socratic and the philosophy taught by Plato” and confidently assures her readers that “[n]o one . . . will seriously dispute that my choice is historically justifiable” (*Mind 1*, 168). It should be noted that her reading of Socrates corresponds very closely to that of Vlastos, whose essay “The Paradox of Socrates” (Vlastos 1971) she cites very favorably (*Mind 1*, 235n98, 236n105). On Arendt’s reading of Socrates, see Cavarero (2019).

and subversion. Understood in this way, the historical Socrates' project would differ essentially from that of Plato. While Socrates was undoubtedly convinced that thinking—"dialectic" in the very general sense of reasoned, discursive exchange with others and with oneself—can deepen our understanding of the meaning of our general concepts, Aristotle (*Met.* A.6.987b4–10) suggests that the view of dialectic as a merely instrumental method for attaining a grasp of unchanging ideal essences is essentially Platonic. While only a small intellectual elite can hope to properly attain immediate access to the ideas as result of "a long communion and living together with the matter itself" (Pl., *Ep.* VII 341c4–d2), everyone capable of speech is in principle capable of reasoned discourse. Arendt underlines the fact that Socrates was not a "professional" intellectual seeking to seclude himself in an ivory tower with other select professionals, but essentially a public figure whose chief interest was the *polis* of the Athenians.

The starting point for such a project of thinking is clearly not wonder and the desire to understand being as such; it is, Arendt insists, the quest for the improvement of human life through deepened self-understanding, in other words, through a deepened experience of *meaning*. In the end, Arendt tells us, there is indeed a "doctrine" to be found in the historical Socrates, but one that boils down to two very simple ethical maxims, both voiced by Socrates in the dialogue *Gorgias* (*Mind* 1, 179–93; cf. *Promise*, 19–23; *Past*, 220, 244–7; *Responsibility*, 18, 72, 77, 82–93, 106–9, 122–4, 142, 144, 151, 153, 156–7, 180–9). The first one: "As for me, I believe that both I and you and all other people hold that it is worse to wrong [*adikein*] than to be wronged [*adikeisthai*], and worse to escape punishment [*mē didonai dikēn*] than to be punished" (Pl., *Grg.* 474b2–5). The second: "Insofar as I am concerned, I think, my good man, that it would be better that my lyre, or a chorus I were leading, be out of tune and in discord, and that the multitude of people disagree with me and contradict me, than that I, being one [*hena onta*], be in discord [*asympōnon*] with myself and contradict myself [*enantia legein*]" (482b7–c3). Both of these notions are immediately dismissed as frivolous by Socrates' interlocutor Callicles, a pupil of the sophist Gorgias and an advocate of "might is right" as the sole natural moral principle (482c–483b). Both statements, Arendt points out, may, to the post-Christian and post-Kantian Western mind, seem rather commonplace; however, they would have appeared nothing short of scandalous to Socrates' utterly inegalitarian, competitive, public-minded, and slave-holding contemporaries, for whom being injured without being able to seek retribution was precisely the dreary lot of the slave and for whom one's status in the eyes of one's peers was everything.

In this context, Arendt argues, both statements make sense primarily from the point of view of the activity that Socrates is advocating: thinking, understood as a discourse with oneself that requires a relationship to oneself and thus a split within the self. In order to think, the individual, who as a public agent is precisely one and undivided, must become a “dividual,” a “two-in-one,” that is, someone who—being one and identical with herself—has to relate to herself and live with herself. As Socrates points out to in a passage of the *Greater Hippias* (*Hippias* 304d1–e5) cited by Arendt (*Mind* 1, 188–90), as soon as he goes home, he is confronted with a “close relative who lives in the same house”—himself—who will immediately start cross-examining his opinions and beliefs. One who reflects is *by* herself, self-conscious, and therefore seeks to avoid self-contradiction. On this specific presupposition, Socrates’ contemporaries and compatriots will indeed ultimately be compelled to agree with his outlandish theses, for they will certainly admit that no one wants to live with someone she despises. To put it briefly, what Socrates has discovered here through his particular experience of thinking is, according to Arendt, a pre-Christian version of the *conscience*, the Greek *syneidēsis* or the Latin *conscientia*, literally “knowing-with(-oneself),” that properly emerges as a concept only in Hellenistic times.¹⁵ The necessity of coming to terms with oneself, of being in harmony with oneself, is an inevitable consequence of all attempts to examine and understand oneself—of all attempts to find individual meaning in one’s individual life, that is, to be a *person* among persons, rather than a cog in a machine, an expendable element of an indistinct human mass (*Responsibility*, 78–9).

Here we have, then, a preliminary reply to the initial question that troubled Arendt in her final years. The thoughtlessness and impersonality that made possible the banal evil of Eichmann and totalitarian functionaries like him was indeed a lack of conscience, an evasion of the two-in-one required for moral personhood. This is not to say that Eichmann and his likes were, as a rule, pathological moral idiots or psychopaths. Rather, their embracement of total ideological mobilization, their inclusion in a total collective production of an ideological “idea,” made any search for individual meaning and orientation in life—and thereby any personal opinions they may have had—superfluous and irrelevant, since a comprehensive collective meaning, orientation, and project, a “supersense” overriding the everyday senselessness of the totalitarian world, were already provided by ideology (*Totalitarianism*, 457–8). Metaphorically speaking, when one is mobilized in an ineluctable mass movement towards

¹⁵ On the conceptual history of conscience, see Ojakangas (2013).

an idea—the classless society, the racially pure society—it becomes extremely difficult to “stop and think,” to step into that tranquil and immobile place of solitude, of being by oneself and relating to oneself, without which thinking becomes impossible (*Mind 1*, 69–80; *Responsibility*, 105).

Due to the unfortunate contingency of Arendt’s untimely death, we do not know what exact form the missing concluding part of *The Life of the Mind*, entitled *Judging*, would have assumed. However, from other texts, we can infer that judgment—the purely spontaneous and undetermined ability to form independent opinions on the “aesthetic” value, the inherent beauty and goodness of particular things and actions, an ability analyzed philosophically in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*—would have turned out to be the key to properly understanding the radical freedom and contingency of the will that was always ultimately downplayed by the philosophical tradition.¹⁶ The ability of one’s will to issue commands to oneself to undertake completely novel, unforeseen, and unexpected courses of action requires a freely choosing or arbitrating function, known to Augustine as *liberum arbitrium*, and in the 1965–6 lectures on “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” Arendt suggests that this function is ultimately identical to judgment (*Responsibility*, 131).¹⁷ Similarly, at the end of volume 2 of *The Life of the Mind*, *Willing* she tells us that the traditional “impasse” of the freedom of the will “cannot be opened or solved except by an appeal to another mental faculty, no less mysterious than the faculty of beginning, the faculty of Judgment” (*Mind 2*, 217).¹⁸ In short, judgment would be the faculty that ultimately enables the human being’s most distinctive capacity, that of beginning entirely new trains of action. In her interpretation of Socrates, Arendt further makes it clear that the faculty of judgment, in turn, would require thinking in the sense of conscience, the stopping-to-think-for-oneself and, ultimately, the being-at-terms-with-oneself that, as we saw, are the keys to genuine personhood.

When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join in is conspicuous

¹⁶ On the tradition’s difficulties with the will, see *Mind 2* (11–51, 195–217). Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* is studied by Arendt at length in *Lectures*. For attempts at reconstructing her theory of judgment, see Beiner (1992); Passerin d’Entrèves (2000).

¹⁷ In “What Is Freedom?” (*Past*, 151–2) the *liberum arbitrium* is equated with judgment as that which recognizes the aim of action and is followed by will. In “The Crisis in Culture” (*Past*, 221), Kant’s concept of judgment is compared to the Aristotelian *phronēsis*, prudence or practical insight, as the situational insight into proper aims of action. On the *liberum arbitrium*, see *Mind 2* (29, 62–3); *Responsibility* (114, 119, 127, 129).

¹⁸ In the concluding section of *Thinking* (*Mind 1*, 213), however, she characterizes the view of thinking as a preparation for judging and judging as a preparation for willing as the “perspective of man insofar as he is an acting being,” legitimate only “within limits.” Arendt here puts emphasis on the respective autonomy and independence of all three mental faculties.

and thereby becomes a kind of action. In such emergencies, it turns out that the purging component of thinking . . . is political by implication. For this destruction has a liberating effect on another faculty, the faculty of judgment, which one may call with some reason the most political of man's mental abilities. . . . If thinking—the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue—actualizes the difference within our identity . . . and thereby results in conscience as its by-product, then judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realizes thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and always too busy to be able to think. (*Mind 1*, 192–3)

To conclude: we see that Arendt's essentially twofold hermeneutic-phenomenological engagement with the Greek beginning of the philosophical tradition is not based on the kind of nostalgic and romanticizing "Graecomania" it is sometimes suspected of.¹⁹ Like her mentor Heidegger, Arendt believes that the necessity of addressing the beginning of our philosophical tradition stems not from a desire to "return" to this beginning—which would be impossible—but from the specific situation contemporary Western thought is presently facing, namely, the completion and end of this tradition and the need to understand even the most extreme manifestations of this end. We have further seen that this engagement focuses on the parting of the ways between philosophy and politics, thinking and public action, that took place in fourth-century BCE Athens. Socrates is the essential watershed here. On the one hand, Socrates' fateful schism with his political community was the most immediate impulse for the Platonic and Aristotelian "metapolitical" attitude that discovers the supreme fulfillment of human existence in the contemplation of the eternal, regards the political realm as, at best, a means to this end, and consequently substitutes political production for political action. On the other hand, Socrates' own, essentially public philosophical activity, as interpreted by Arendt, discovered precisely a fundamental ethical, and ultimately political, relevance of thinking as conscience, as the emergence of the two-in-one that demands reconciliation with one's own self. As discourse with oneself, thinking inherently compels us to judge ourselves, and by thus enabling us to be moral persons among other persons, it may enable us in turn to judge others and, ultimately, to start new, singular, and free trains of action that irremediably transform the world.

¹⁹ On Arendt's alleged "Graecomania," see Taminiiaux (2000).

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