

ARENDT AGAINST ATHENS
Rereading *The Human Condition*

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Miss Arendt is more reticent than, perhaps, she should be, about what actually went on in this public realm of the Greeks.

—W. H. Auden¹

I

The Human Condition has long had a peculiar status in the critical reception of Hannah Arendt's political thought.² First published in 1958, it is undoubtedly the most ambitious, and almost certainly the most accomplished, of Arendt's completed works. It contains the consummate statement of her distinctive theories of the public realm and of political freedom, which are surely her most important contributions to political theory. Yet even many of her admirers believe that this same book succumbs most fully to the failings for which its author is most often faulted: unabashed elitism, indifference to moral constraints, and an aridly self-contained ideal of politics that excludes basic matters of justice from public concern.³ All of those failings, moreover, would seem to stem from a single source: Arendt's seemingly unqualified admiration for the politics of the ancient Greek city-state, or *polis*, which figures prominently in the book's discussions of political action,

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freedom, and the public realm. The impassioned moral commitments so manifest in her writings on totalitarianism and other evils in the politics of her own time seem strangely forgotten in this book's apparently unstinting praise of the classical polis—notwithstanding the institutions of slavery and oppression that sustained it, to say nothing of the belligerence and strife that often infected its actual politics. For this reason, even some of Arendt's most vigorous critical defenders have treated the book as a peculiar aberration in her thought, a regrettable lapse into an unrealistic and irresponsible nostalgia for the days of Pericles' Athens.⁴

In this essay I would like to contest the basic premise of that opinion. I will argue to the contrary that throughout *The Human Condition* Arendt deliberately—and *systematically*—attributes to the ancient Greeks a set of beliefs about the nature of politics that are at odds with her own theoretical claims in this same book. Following the lead of a suggestive recent article by Jacques Taminiaux, I will seek to show that her understanding of action and its limits fundamentally departs from the one she attributes to the Greeks.⁵ Let me be clear, though, that my aim here is not simply to present another, more palatable side to Arendt's politics, nor is it to show that her feelings for the Greeks were more mixed than is often supposed.⁶ It is instead to propose an interpretation of the relevant sections of *The Human Condition* that is able to make coherent sense of what Arendt says about the Greeks as part of a larger *argument*, one that sets many of the book's most commonly quoted statements in an entirely different light. My interest in vindicating the book against the charges of a morally obtuse nostalgia for the Greeks' politics is only secondary, a means toward clarifying Arendt's theoretical claims about the nature of human activities and political life. The conclusions that will emerge from my rereading of the text is that Arendt's theory of the public realm is considerably more expansive than her remarks on the polis would seem to indicate, and that her corresponding critique of modern society is both more subtle, and also a good deal more compelling, than a complaint that we fail to live up to some dated Hellenic ideal.

The present tendency among scholars writing about Arendt is to approach her work thematically, culling her most striking statements on any given topic from a variety of sources at once. That approach may be unobjectionable in itself, but it has encouraged the practice of severing those statements from their intended argumentative context and treating her books themselves as little more than haphazard collections of aphoristic dicta. Even when scholars have dealt solely with *The Human Condition*, they have generally paid little heed to the intricate structure of the book's forty-five discrete sections or to its author's expectation that her readers will be borne through those sections by the flow of her cumulative argument. As it happens, Arendt's comments

about the Greek polis occur mainly in two widely separated parts of the book, the first in chapter 2, "The Public and the Private Realm" (primarily in §§4-6), and the second in chapter 5, "Action" (§§27-28). It is in the first of these discussions that Arendt draws most explicitly on Greek ideas to elucidate her ideas about what properly constitutes a truly "political" public realm. Yet the second is no less frequently quoted when critics try to explain her supposed admiration for the Greeks' politics; it contains her well-known description of the polis as an arrangement intended "to multiply the occasions to win 'immortal fame'" and to serve as "a kind of organized remembrance" for its citizens' great deeds (§27:197-98). What I will seek to show, however, is that Arendt's purposes in those two parts of the book fundamentally differ, and that the point of that second discussion is precisely to draw attention to beliefs of the Greeks that she cannot herself endorse.

That second account of the polis, occurring in the middle of chapter 5, "Action," can be properly understood only in light of theoretical claims about the nature of human activities that Arendt advances over the course of the long stretch of the text that separates it from the first, back in chapter 2, "The Public and the Private Realm." And those theoretical claims, in turn, make sense only in *their* immediate context, which has little to do with any ideas she takes from the Greeks. As we will see, they belong instead to an argument whose aim is to explain the conditions under which human action as such is comprehensible; it is Arendt's response to a philosophical problem concerning the possibility of freedom that she inherits from Kant. Unfortunately, because her first description of the polis is presented before her theory of action is fully in place, what she says about the Greeks' beliefs there tends to overshadow and, as it were, discolor many of those later theoretical claims, which in turn obscures the critical thrust of her comments about the polis in chapter 5. To correct for this distortion, my procedure in this essay will be to begin by introducing the philosophical core of the theory of human activities that Arendt develops over the course of the book as a whole, including crucial elements of that theory that she does not present until the opening sections of chapter 5 itself. Only after that will I briefly consider her preliminary discussion of the Greeks in the pertinent sections of chapter 2. I will then return to chapter 5 for a detailed examination of Arendt's later discussion of the Greeks' politics there, focusing on one section in particular, §27, "The Greek Solution." My reconstruction of her argument in that section will show not only that her own understanding of action departs from the Greeks', but that it does so in a way that clarifies the intended limits of her prior appeal to their ideas with respect to the nature of the public realm.

Among my aims in this essay is to demonstrate, if only by partial illustration, that *The Human Condition* amply rewards this kind of detailed, sec-

tion-by-section attention. I will thus refrain (until the very end) from pursuing any of the many possible points of contact with Arendt's other works. Yet there is one other text of hers to which I will be referring extensively here—an unduly neglected later text of *The Human Condition* itself. It has been too little noticed by students of Arendt's work that she in fact wrote two, significantly different versions of *The Human Condition*. Both were published in her lifetime, and indeed both are currently in print—in different languages. The first is the original 1958 edition, which Arendt wrote in English. This is the version of the book that has generally been read by scholars, at least those writing in English or French. The second is Arendt's own translation of the book into German, published in 1960 as *Vita activa: oder Vom tätigen Leben*.⁷ Although ostensibly only a translation, the slightly later German-language version actually contains a large number of small but significant departures from the original, mostly in the form of discreet, clarifying additions—which remain all but undocumented. Not surprisingly, though, these revised passages, added by Arendt in her own native tongue, often illuminate her meaning at precisely the points where the English-language original is most dense and obscure.⁸

II

Arendt uses the Latin phrase '*vita activa*' as a portmanteau term to cover the three activities whose "elementary articulations" she sets out to describe in *The Human Condition*'s three central chapters: 'labor', 'work', and 'action'.⁹ These three activities are "fundamental," she says, "because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man"—namely, that we are living beings, that we inhabit a world of our own making, and that we share that world with other people (§1:7). *Labor*, for Arendt, includes all that we need to do (or have done by others) to sustain and reproduce our bodies, that is, to satisfy the recurring, natural needs we share with all living things. The category of 'labor' as she uses it thus extends also to consumption and to (sexual) reproduction, which together with labor in the ordinary sense (i.e., procuring the means of subsistence) adhere to the metabolic cycles through which all biological life is sustained and regenerated. In contradistinction to that metabolic (or quasi-metabolic) activity, Arendt uses the term *work* exclusively to describe the production of durable things: tools, shelter, and the countless other man-made objects that assist our labor and that together compose what she calls "the human artifice." While labor conforms to the unceasing natural rhythms of growth and decay, the activity of work, which she often also calls 'fabrication', affords us some limited mas-

tery over those same processes, interposing a measure of stability onto nature's ceaseless flux. *Action*, finally, is what "goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter" (§1:7). Rather than sustain our bodies or add things to our world, action's effects are felt in what Arendt describes as the intangible "web of human relationships" that exists "wherever men live together" (§25:184); of the three, she says, action alone is what bestows meaning on our lives and our world (§33:236).

Arendt's treatment of these three as distinct, independent activities may at first seem rather implausible. After all, much of what people actually do would obviously qualify for more than one of these three labels, as in the case of the "work" performed by a wage-earning artisan, a craftsman whose trade is also his living. Yet Arendt's aim is not to provide a definitive taxonomy of possible activities, as if to shunt every instance of human endeavor into one and only one of three rubrics. What she seeks to provide, rather, is a set of discrete *abstractions* from the welter of worldly activity, each with its own logic of explanation and each corresponding to a different dynamic of change and persistence in time. In other words, her contention is that *insofar* as whatever we do belongs to one of these activities, it will necessarily conform to that activity's particular explanatory logic and temporal dynamic. Consider that case of the wage-earning artisan. Insofar as he *works*, his craft will yield a final result, a lasting product that will persist in the world apart from its maker; the activity ends when its intended design is fulfilled. Insofar as he *labors*, though, that singular, teleological sequence is subsumed within the ongoing rhythm of effort and rest, our artisan's daily grind. The bodily needs he serves in earning his wages will never be sated as long as he lives, and so the activity never will cease—though he may contrive to get others to bear the brunt of its toil for him. Insofar as he *labors*, moreover, the needs he answers are much the same as anyone else's; the market that sets his wages treats him as one of an aggregate only. He may be similarly anonymous insofar as he *works*: neither the process of making nor the products made need bear the maker's name. But no such anonymity is possible insofar as he *acts*: if he is to share his tools, say, or carry out a contract, his fellows must be able to recognize and keep track of his doings as a distinct individual among others.

We might say that these three activities correspond to the ways in which we are able to make sense of different kinds of *change* in our lives and in our world—'change', that is, in a general sense, akin to what Aristotle called '*kinēsis*'. A nod to Aristotle is appropriate here, for the kinds of processes that Arendt associates with labor, work, and action, respectively, correspond roughly to Aristotle's own accounts of the same (with her notion of 'labor' substituting for the 'nutritive' activity he had attributed to all living beings).¹⁰ But if Arendt's categories resemble Aristotle's, her theoretical project puts

her a good deal closer to another philosopher, Kant. Eschewing the former's metaphysical ambition, she instead adopts what is in effect a loosely Kantian strategy of transcendental argument, whose aim is to arrive at universal truths about the world solely from the necessary (i.e., transcendental) conditions of our experience of that world, without any appeal to the nature of the world as it might be "in itself."¹¹ In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had sought to derive a priori principles valid for any possible experience solely from the way our cognitive faculties must organize all such experience.¹² The relevant sense of 'possible' for Kant is thus 'possible to understand': any object we perceive or event we experience is fundamentally structured by ineluctable constraints to our understanding itself. So too for Arendt, though her categories apply at a lower level of abstraction, namely, to the possible forms of specifically human activity in the world.¹³ In other words, her abstract theses concerning essential attributes of labor, work, and action derive from what she takes to be the fundamental (and numerically finite) ways in which we are able to *comprehend* the basic kinds of continuity and change that human beings are able to effect through their own activity.

The implicit Kantian background to Arendt's project points to the special complexity of that project in the case of action. In the cases of labor and work, we might say (very roughly) that Arendt's project is simply to supply categories appropriate to more specific types of experience than Kant's analysis had covered. In the case of action, though, Kant's analysis itself leaves an obstacle that Arendt must somehow surmount. Action, as she uses the term, consists in the exercise of human freedom in the world; to qualify as such, it must be comprehensible as a spontaneous initiative, a novel beginning (§24:177-78). But Kant had famously argued (in a section of the *Critique* known as the Third Antinomy) that our experience can contain no truly spontaneous events; that is simply because the rule of regular causation—imputing a complete series of antecedent causes to any event—is itself one of those constitutive rules to which our cognition invariably conforms.¹⁴ What Kant himself had concluded from this is that the concept of freedom therefore has valid application only *outside* our cognitive experience of the world, that is, with reference to our own faculties of reason and rational volition (whose workings in the world we can neither witness nor comprehend). That conclusion could not satisfy Arendt, though, because her own theoretical interest lies in our ability to make sense of human actions as they affect our world, that is, from precisely the third-person point of view that Kant's position would preclude. The burden of her theory is in effect to specify an alternative conceptual schema by which we are able to comprehend spontaneous human initiatives as such. Rather than overturn the principle of physical causation, as applied to events generally, Arendt seeks to supplement it with an account of

another mode of comprehension, one appropriate for events only insofar as they pertain to human agency. Her aim in this respect is not so much to prove that free human actions are possible as it is to answer how it is possible for us to *comprehend* action, given the fact that we do—and what form any such comprehension must take, given its apparent incompatibility with the causal explanation of physical states. It is on the basis of the necessary conditions attendant on that alternate modal schema (as it were) that she then goes on to derive the basic features that all comprehensible action must share.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt addresses this problem rather obliquely, primarily in the first three sections of chapter 5: §24, “The Disclosure of the Agent in Action and Speech,” §25, “The Web of Relationships and the Enacted Stories,” and §26, “The Frailty of Human Affairs.” It will suffice for our purposes for me to sketch some of her basic theoretical claims in those sections without going into the (often obscure) details of her supporting arguments.¹⁵ According to her account, the schema (to use Kant’s term) through which action makes sense is what she calls an “enacted story.” Unlike a causal explanation—which would dissolve human behavior into a complicated series of stimuli and reactions governed by uniform natural laws, with an infinite regress of causes trailing any given effect—every such story has a discrete beginning and end, spanning a unique sequence of events that together yield a singular (if often discursively elusive) meaning. What makes it possible for human actions to cohere into stories, according to her, is their relation to a distinct, unique individual, whose own life is itself temporally bounded by birth and death.¹⁶ And those stories are meaningful by virtue of the fact that their events occur within, and affect, an (always) already meaningful “web of human relationships.”¹⁷ That is, actions are meaningful by virtue of the way they fulfill, disappoint, exceed, or surprise the mutual *expectations* that constitute human relationships: “it is because of the already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action . . . ‘produces’ stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things” (§25:184). The key word here is ‘because’: it is *because* we find ourselves acting in an already existing web of relationships that we can make sense of our “movements” with respect to one another as discrete, meaningful stories, each of which begins with a new “insertion” into that web—a novel *imbroglio*, as it were—and leads up to a conclusive *dénouement*.

Arendt’s conception of action’s specific mode of comprehensibility serves as the basis for her principal theses concerning the (transcendental) conditions under which action as such is possible. The most important of these conditions is what she called the “disclosure of the agent’s identity.” In the first section of chapter 5, “The Disclosure of the Agent in Speech and

Action" (§24), she says, "the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: 'Who are you?'" (§24:178). That way of putting it is perhaps misleadingly grandiose; the idea itself is simple. Every action must "contain" the agent's identity somewhat in the sense that a bank check must bear a valid signature for it to be recognized as such. That is, action must be *assignable* to a distinct, identifiable person if it is to make sense within a story, since it is around individual protagonists that the disparate events of a story cohere. "Action without a name, a 'who' attached to it, is meaningless": there is nobody there to tell the story about (§24:180-81; cf. VA §24:222). Without a recognizable protagonist whose initiatives others may identify as such—and respond with initiatives of their own—there will be no story there to be told (§25:190). For this reason, action is possible only under conditions in which people are willing to announce their projects, lay claim to their deeds, and give others a stake in how they turn out. That is an idea Arendt expresses most clearly in a passage added in the German text:

[Das] Risiko, als ein Jemand im Miteinander in Erscheinung zu treten, kann nur auf sich nehmen, wer bereit ist, in diesem Miteinander künftig zu existieren, und das heißt bereit ist, im Miteinander unter seinesgleichen sich zu bewegen, Aufschluß zu geben darüber, wer er ist, und auf die ursprüngliche Fremdheit dessen, der durch Geburt als Neuankömmling in die Welt gekommen ist, zu verzichten. (VA §24:220; cf. HC §24:180)
 [The] risk of making an appearance as a 'someone' among others can be taken only by whoever is ready to exist henceforth among others in this way, and that means being ready to move among others, to give out who one is, and to renounce the original foreignness of a newcomer born into the world.

Without the agent's own readiness to make himself known—"announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do," as she puts it—action is impossible; that is, our capacity to comprehend any such conduct *as* action is thwarted (§24:178-79).¹⁸ But the agent's own readiness to "move among others" is not all that is needed for action to be possible. Those others among whom he "moves" must also be ready to recognize and acknowledge those movements as uniquely his.¹⁹ Only when both conditions are met can there be what Arendt called "the space of appearances," the figuratively "in-between" space "where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly" (§27:198-99). For action to be recognizable as such the agent must actively make an appearance—or as Arendt puts it in the German passage just quoted, "*in Erscheinung zu treten*," literally, "step into appearance."²⁰ This manner of "making an appearance" anew with respect to the expectations that inhere in human relationships is what constitutes action's spontaneous beginnings; the capacity to do so is thus a *sine qua*

non of human freedom. Human affairs—and therefore politics—can be comprehended as the stuff of free human action only if each person involved is willing and able to step into this figurative space with initiatives of his own, and only if his fellows are willing and able to recognize them as such.

III

In “The Disclosure of the Agent in Speech and Action,” the first section of chapter 5, Arendt says in passing that “full appearance” of action is possible only in “the public realm” (§24:180). But she offers no elaboration on that latter idea in this section, so her readers are left to fall back on her earlier discussion of the topic in chapter 2, “The Public and the Private Realm.” It is in that earlier discussion (preceding the book’s main analyses of labor, work, and action) that she first associates her ideas about the nature of the public realm with the ancient Greek polis. There she draws on the Greeks’ beliefs about the polis primarily to explain her own rather unconventional distinction between a public realm that is genuinely “political”—allowing for human freedom—and one that is merely “social.” As she uses the term, “society” consists specifically in “the public organization of the life process itself” and “the form [of living together] in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance” (§6:46). By that definition, any such “social” association is predicated on the fact that the people so organized are driven by the uniform, unceasing needs of their bodies—the incessant cycles of labor and consumption—and so may be presumed to have little choice but to interact in the way that they do. She argues that the demands of “society” in this sense have increasingly overrun the public realm in modern times, bringing their inherent presumption of uniformity and unfreedom to human interaction. It is to illustrate what she believes was at stake in that pernicious development that she contrasts it with the very different kind of public realm that she takes the Greek polis to represent.

“According to Greek thought,” she says, “the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family” (§4:24). The polis, as the Greeks understood it, was not an association of households, but another kind of organization entirely, established to allow the citizens to engage in activities essentially different from and unrelated to the satisfaction of bodily needs that took place in each citizen’s discrete (and discreet) household economy. As she puts it, “No activity that served only the purpose of making a living, of sustaining only the life process, was permitted to enter the political realm, and this at the risk of abandoning trade and manufacture to

the industriousness of slaves and foreigners” (§5:37). She argues that the Greeks’ relegation of labor and bodily necessity to the hidden domain of the household—notwithstanding the tremendous inefficiency that arrangement entailed—was what preserved the polis as a separate space for the citizens’ freedom.

It is because the Greeks recognized the fundamental unfreedom involved in service to those bodily needs, she claims, that even the most egalitarian and freedom-loving among them deemed it appropriate for the household realm to be ruled by inequality and force. Yet while the citizens of the polis relied on the service of disenfranchised women and slaves, that is not to say that for Arendt their freedom consisted in that power to command others’ labor or in the leisure afforded thereby. On the contrary, she says,

To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself. . . . Thus within realm of the household freedom did not exist, for the household head, its ruler, was considered to be free only insofar as he had the power to leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals. (§5:32)

To require the service of slaves was no less a sign of bondage to necessity, on this view, than to serve as one. Mastery over the household was at most *conducive* to freedom, in that it provided the opportunity (for some) to enter a different “realm” where men could deal with one another on a different footing entirely. What the polis itself provided was the occasion for citizens to comport with one another freely as equals, *as if* they were not subject to the bondage of bodily needs at all. We have already seen why this should be significant for Arendt’s theory: action itself (and thus freedom) depends crucially on people’s readiness to recognize one another’s capacity for it. The citizens’ freedom, in short, derived from their capacity to *disregard* the fact that they too were enmeshed all the while in the household’s unfreedom, as beholden to bodily needs as anyone else. What made the polis a space for freedom was thus precisely its citizens’ mutual acknowledgment and recognition as acting beings.

Here in chapter 2, however, Arendt does not very clearly distinguish between what she takes to be the true theoretical basis for the Greeks’ political freedom, on one hand, and the whole set of their beliefs and practices that she cites as evidence for the historical fact that they sought that freedom in the polis, on the other. This creates some unfortunate ambiguity in her account of the public realm in this chapter. Consider just this one well-known passage:

[Their] public realm itself, the polis, was pervaded by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique

deeds or achievements that he was the best of all (*aien aristeuein*). The public realm, in other words, was reserved for individuality; it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were. (§6:41)

The Greeks' "fiercely agonal spirit" is clearly evidence that individuality as such was given its due, but is it itself an essential condition for a viable public realm? We have already seen the reasons she advances later in the book for supposing that a "space of appearances" is possible only under conditions in which people recognize one another as distinct individuals, each laying claim to deeds of his own. But must that recognition be of a kind that is so terribly difficult to wrest from one's fellows? Must it be won in a high stakes game where only a happy few may hope to prevail? And must the requisite disregard for bodily necessity take the form of the outright *contempt* for labor, and for those who perform it, that she repeatedly ascribes to those who were able to enter that agon? The prevailing critical consensus concerning *The Human Condition* is that its author would want to answer all of these questions in the affirmative. But a very different answer emerges when we consider the book's second discussion of the polis, to which we will now turn.

IV

Arendt's second discussion of the Greek polis, in chapter 5, occurs primarily in §27, "The Greek Solution." (I will be considering this section together with a few related passages from §28, "Power and the Space of Appearances.") The "solution" named in the title of §27 refers to the Greeks' response to what she calls "the frailty of human affairs." In the section immediately before it, "The Frailty of Human Affairs" (§26), she associates that frailty with two "predicaments" arising from the basic nature of action. Those are action's "boundlessness"—the fact that "action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners" (§26:190), and its "unpredictability"—the fact that the ultimate meaning of a deed "must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least so long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences" (§26:192). Each of these predicaments derives directly from her basic thesis that action as such is comprehensible to us only in the form of "enacted stories," which in turn are possible by virtue of the ubiquitous, open-ended "web of human relationships" in which we find ourselves. In §27 itself, Arendt uses the phrase 'the frailty of human affairs' more generally to refer also to action's "futility," a predicament she associates with action's "intangibility," the confounding evanescence of its occurrence.²¹ It is primarily with reference to this third predica-

ment that she identifies “the foundation of the polis” as the “original, prephilosophic Greek remedy for this frailty” (§27:196). As she famously describes it, the polis was to remedy that apparent futility by providing “a kind of organized remembrance,” whose aim was “to assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech . . . would become imperishable” (§27:197-98).

Critics have just about always assumed that Arendt herself regards the polis as a viable, indeed admirable “remedy” for this “frailty of human affairs.” That is in part because the only explicit negative judgments of any Greek ideas in the entire section occur in a passage where her immediate subject is not the polis at all, but rather the seemingly different remedy to this frailty that she attributes to two Greek *philosophers*, Plato and Aristotle—whom she insists shared a deep-seated aversion to action in general and an antipathy toward the polis in particular.²² According to her, their would-be remedy to the frustrations inherent in action consisted in replacing action with the activity that allows for solitary “mastery,” fabrication—or rather, attempting to treat action *as if* it were fabrication, an activity beset with none of action’s predicaments. It was for this reason, she claims, that those philosophers had elevated “lawmaking and city-building to the highest rank in political life,” at the expense of the kinds of agonal action the earlier Greeks had prized. She says,

To them [i.e., Plato and Aristotle] legislation and the execution of decisions by vote are the most legitimate political activities because in them ‘men act like craftsmen’: the result of their action is a tangible product, and its process has a clearly recognizable end. This is no longer, or rather, not yet action (*praxis*) properly speaking, but making (*poiēsis*), which they prefer because of its greater reliability. It is as though they had said that if men only renounce their capacity for action . . . there could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs. (§27:195)

Their attempt to treat acting as if it were making, with its “greater reliability,” is no more than a dangerous delusion, she warns; it threatens “to destroy the very substance of human relationships.” Because she so closely ties this delusion to the philosophers’ animus against the polis, her pointed rebuke to them here tends to create the impression that the “original, prephilosophic remedy” embodied in the polis itself, by contrast, must be one she approves.

Yet the impression of an invidious contrast between philosophers and citizens turns out to be a red herring here. That is because her primary concern in “The Greek Solution” is not how highly the Greeks valued action—the matter that divides philosophers and citizens—but rather how they understood it, and in this she sees little difference between the two camps. As Jacques Taminiaux has perceptively noted, the concept of legislation that Arendt criti-

cizes in Plato and Aristotle here is essentially *the same* as the one she associated with the polis in this very section, notwithstanding the opposite evaluations of action she attaches to it in either case. Shortly before turning to the philosophers here, Arendt attributes to the Greeks of the polis the unusual belief that lawmaking as such did not count as a political act, elliptically describing that belief as an “outstanding symptom” of their “highly individualistic” conception of action:

In their opinion the lawmaker was like the builder of the city wall, someone who had to do and finish his work before political activity could begin. . . . To them, the laws, like the wall around the city, were not the result of action but products of making. (§27:194)

She goes on to say that “the fundamental Greek experiences of action and politics [did not] comprehend what later turned out to be the political genius of Rome: legislation and foundation” (§27:195). Although she does not elaborate on this fleeting reference to the Romans’ “political genius” here, the comparison is clearly meant to reflect unfavorably on the Greeks. Back in chapter 2, she had already remarked (in a footnote) that “The Roman word for law, *lex*, has an entirely different meaning [than the Greek word for law, *nomos*]; it indicates a formal relationship between people rather than the wall that separates them from others” (§8:63 n. 62, see also §8:59). That earlier remark helps explain why she takes the Greek opinion that the law serves as a kind of “wall” to be an outstanding symptom of their “highly individualistic” conception of action, as Taminiaux has pointed out.²³ The symptom is twofold, or compound: first, that the Greeks did not include the maintenance of “formal relationships between people” in their concept of action, and second, that for this reason alone they considered any such activity to be outside the concerns of politics. Once we recall that earlier remark, moreover, with its indication that the relevant alternative to the Greek idea is law conceived as a “formal relation between people,” it should become clear that Arendt’s analysis of the flaw in the philosophers’ attempt to evade the frailty of human affairs should actually apply with equal force to the Greeks of the polis. For if Aristotle “thinks of acting in terms of making, and of its result, the relationship between men, in terms of an accomplished ‘work,’ ” as she claims, then so too do the citizens of the polis—at least when it comes to law (§27:196).

It is shortly after this that Arendt makes some of her most frequently quoted statements about the polis in *The Human Condition* as a whole, namely, those concerning the Greeks’ ideas about fame and remembrance. Her discussion of those ideas would seem to bear little relation to what she has just said about their notion of law or to the criticism thereby implied. Yet I would like to argue that her underlying aim in this later part of “The Greek

Solution” is in fact to illustrate another side of this same pernicious confusion between action and work. Consider the curious gloss she provides for Pericles’ Funeral Oration, which she cites as her main (actually, sole) evidence for “what the Greeks themselves thought of the polis and its *raison d’être*”:

The polis—if we trust the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration—gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them; without assistance from others, those who acted together will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and in future ages. (§27:197)²⁴

The first thing to notice about this statement is that the relationship between action and work is still very much at issue. For throughout *The Human Condition* Arendt treats the work of the poet—that is, the “assistance” that her Pericles says his people could do without—as a consummate instance of fabrication.²⁵ The German-language version of this same passage adds a further sentence to make this understanding of poetry as an instance of fabrication explicit, and to underline its significance here:

Die Aufgabe der Polis war es, eine Stätte bereitzustellen, an der sich der unvergängliche Ruhm großer Taten und Worte ansiedeln und unter den Menschen verweilen konnte, um so das Handeln gleichsam von seiner Abhängigkeit von den herstellenden und dichtenden Künsten zu emanzipieren. (VA §27:247-48)

The task of the polis was to prepare a site where the undying fame of great deeds and words would be able to establish itself and linger among men, and so, as it were, to emancipate action from its dependence on the fabricated and poeticized arts.

Plausibly or not, she takes Pericles’s passing conceit that his heroes would need no Homer to imply a more general ambition to “emancipate action” from any dependence on fabrication, and she elevates that ambition to a central tenet of the city’s mission.

Is that a mission that Arendt would have us admire? The rhetorical force of her appeal to Pericles’ “famous words” certainly leaves that impression. Yet let us not overlook that statement’s curious, conditional form. *If* we trust Pericles’s famous words, the polis guarantees everlasting remembrance. But would Arendt have us trust Pericles here? I would argue that there can be only one answer: no. Pericles’ confidence that Athens’ heroes would need “neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words,” or indeed any “assistance from others” at all, in maintaining their “everlasting remembrance” simply cannot be her own view. For her own theory of action directly contradicts it. She had emphatically said in prior chapters that if the performance of

action is to be preserved, it is in fact *entirely* dependent on fabrication, whose products are not deeds but durable works. According to her, it is only when deeds are transformed into such works—“into sayings of poetry, the written page or the printed book, into paintings or sculpture, into all sorts of records, documents, and monuments”—that they have any chance of remembrance at all (§12:95). Her most important statement of this thesis occurs in §23, “The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art” (the last section of chapter 4, “Work”):

[Because the] “doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words” will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed . . . acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. (§23:173)

Not all history writing or monument building is art, of course, but the point is that even those more modest works contribute to this same durable “human artifice”—as action, alone, cannot.

But we do not even need to look that far back in the book to be sure of where Arendt stands on this. She had made this exact point more briefly in an earlier passage of §27 itself, just before her previous comments about the polis and its “agonal spirit.” Speaking of Achilles, whom she goes on to say was the inspiration for the Greeks’ “highly individualistic” conception of action, she remarks,

Even Achilles, it is true, remains dependent on the storyteller, poet, or historian, *without whom everything he did remains futile*; but he is the only “hero,” and therefore the hero par excellence, who delivers into the narrator’s hands the full significance of his deed, so that it is *as though* he had not merely enacted the story of his life but at the same time also “made” it. (§27:194 [italics added])

Even Achilles, the consummate hero, would soon have been forgotten but for his transfiguration in Homer’s hands. The men of Arendt’s Athens may have made him their model, but they have managed to overlook that crucial proviso to his fame. Their ambition to attain “everlasting remembrance” without a Homer, to make deeds imperishable entirely on their own, is no more than a vain wish, perhaps a species of hubris. And the irony goes deep: if we still remember these “famous words” of Pericles at all—assuming they even were his—or the deeds of which he boasts, that is only because he too, in the end, found a Homer of his own, in Thucydides.

As it happens, Arendt's only other reference to Pericles' speech in the book concerned this very same issue. On that second occasion (§28, "Power and the Space of Appearances"), she makes it even more clear that what is at issue is not merely the Greeks' attitude toward art but that toward fabrication as such, and thus also their corresponding attitude toward action:

The words of Pericles, as Thucydides reports them, are perhaps unique in their supreme confidence that men can enact *and save* their greatness at the same time and, as it were, by one and the same gesture, and that the performance as such will . . . not need the transforming reification of *homo faber* to keep it in reality. (§28:205)

Of all the proud claims Pericles makes for Athens in the Funeral Oration, this is surely an odd one to grant such exclusive, recurring importance—a sure sign she has a didactic point to make. The real issue for her is not whether Pericles had erred in supposing that Athens could do without a poet laureate, as it were, nor is it whether the Athenians—of all people!—should have held art in higher esteem. Rather, it is how this particular belief about the superfluity of poetry in securing remembrance—and of fabrication generally in doing so—reveals a corresponding flaw in their understanding of action and thus also in their politics.

"What is outstandingly clear in Pericles' formulations," she says in that later reference to him, "is that the innermost meaning of the acted deed and spoken word is independent of victory and defeat and must remain untouched by any eventual outcome, by their consequences for better or for worse" (§28:205). Now, if the Greeks believed that the polis assured "everlasting remembrance" of its heroes' deeds "without assistance from others," then it would make perfect sense for her to say that they located the meaning of deeds in the moment of their performance, without regard to their eventual outcome. But could Arendt herself believe this? Surely not. For this, too, conflicts with her own theory—specifically, her thesis that the meaning of action arises in the form of stories. In fact, she takes exactly the opposite view. "To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin," she had said in "The Frailty of Human Affairs" (§26), "and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings" (§26:190). Or again: "the light that illuminates processes of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end, frequently when all the participants are dead" (§26:192). If meaning arises in the form of stories, of the agent's sufferings no less than his deeds, how could the meaning of an action possibly "remain untouched" by the action's eventual outcome, its victory or defeat?²⁶ Arendt's Minerva may have many owls—ininitely more than Hegel's, a different one for every deed—and yet each flies only at dusk.

In this second discussion of Pericles' Oration (§28), she remarks, "Thucydides, or Pericles, knew full well that he had broken with the normal standards for everyday behavior when he found the glory of Athens in having left behind 'everywhere everlasting remembrance (*mnēmeia aidia*) of their good and their evil deeds'" (§28:205-6). Her seeming endorsement here of Pericles's apparent willingness to countenance "evil deeds" for the sake of greatness—an attitude that Nietzsche, for one, had frankly admired—is just about the sole textual basis for her critics' frequent contention that her own theory of action embraces a similarly Nietzschean immoralism.²⁷ But again, is this her own view, or just one she finds in the Greeks? The "criterion of greatness" that she has Pericles avow amounts to whether a deed succeeds in attaining "everlasting remembrance" through its performance alone—so that it would "not need the transforming reification of *homo faber* to keep it in reality." With his "supreme confidence that men can enact *and* save their greatness at the same time, by one and the same gesture," Pericles (or Arendt's Pericles, at any rate) might well have been willing to disregard moral decency for the sake of a deed that could do so much. But that "criterion of greatness" could hardly be a plausible one for Arendt herself—because according to her, as we have just seen, there are no such deeds. Even Achilles, the consummate hero, depends on the poet, *homo faber*; even he could only "enact" his deed, not also "save" it. Pericles's rationale for the pursuit of greatness at any price, the outcome be damned, can have no place in Arendt's own theory. And if it does not, then nor would we have any grounds to suppose she admires the reckless, feckless ambition behind it.

It is against this background that we must read Arendt's well-known description of the polis "as a kind of organized remembrance" near the end of "The Greek Solution." That much-quoted passage runs as follows:

Men's life together in the form of the polis *seemed to assure* that *the most futile of human activities*, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made "products," the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable. The organization of the polis, physically secured by the walls around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws—lest the succeeding generations change its identity beyond recognition—is a kind of organized remembrance. (§27:198 [italics added])

The polis "*seemed to assure*" that men's deeds and their stories would become imperishable—but it should be clear by now we cannot take that seeming assurance on its face. Note that the 'organization' so described refers only to the erection of the city's containing walls and the institution of its laws, the latter expressly conceived as a kind of "wall" meant to withstand change from "the succeeding generations." That is, the perceived threat

against which the polis is organized, so to speak, is simply the fear that succeeding generations might arrive with projects of their own—and ideas of their own about what would be worth remembering. If the philosophers' failed remedy to the frailty of human affairs had implied a wish to renounce the capacity for action—"on the condition that further action is not desirable or possible"—the would-be remedy the polis represents turns out to be much the same. (That, surely, is why the title of §27 refers to only *one* "Greek Solution.") If anything, it is worse: while the philosophers wish to renounce action altogether, the self-styled heroes of the polis want to foist that renunciation on everyone but themselves.²⁸

Far from serving as Arendt's ideal, the Greeks' notion of "organized remembrance" turns out to stand for a deeply unappealing picture of politics—and that is precisely her point. Rewriting this same passage for the German edition, she made the weirdness of their project all the more apparent:

Die Organisation der Polis, deren physischer Bestand durch die Stadtmauer und deren geistiges Gesicht durch das Gesetz gegründet und festgelegt ist (nämlich um zu verhindern, daß diese einmalige Physiognomie sich in der Folge der Generationen bis zur Unkenntlichkeit verändert), ist ihrem Wesen nach ein organisiertes Andenken, in dem aber, *im Unterschied zu dem, was wir von den Römern her unter Erinnerung verstehen*, das Vergangene nicht als Vergangenes durch das Kontinuum der Zeit hindurch mit dem Bewußtsein eines zeitlichen Abstands erinnert wird, sondern *unmittelbar, in zeitlich nicht veränderlicher Gestalt, in einer immerwährenden Gegenwärtigkeit gehalten wird.* (VA §27:248-49 [italics added])

The organization of the polis, founded and secured in its physical condition by means of the city wall, and in its spiritual character by means of the law (that is, so as to prevent this unique physiognomy from being changed beyond recognition in succeeding generations), is in essence a kind of organized remembrance, in which, however—*unlike in what we, following the Romans, understand as memory*—the past is not to be remembered through the continuity of time as the past, with the awareness of a temporal distance, but instead *is to be directly maintained in a perpetual present, in a temporally unchanged form.*

The German text thus spells out what the original version had left the reader to guess: this "kind of organized remembrance" amounts to a fantasy wish to prolong the present, a vain refusal to accept the passing of time. The brief reference to the Romans inserted here—together with her earlier allusion to their "political genius"—makes it impossible to doubt her own distance from the Greeks' strange idea of remembrance. And a little bit further on in §27, to amplify the point even more, the German text includes one further, no less fantastic image for what the Greeks sought: a permanent pageant no player need ever depart.²⁹

The political idea that Arendt links with Pericles' name is not only vain (in both senses of the word), it is also destructive. For once we recognize

Arendt's critical distance from that ideal, we can immediately see that she directly implicates its "agonal spirit" in the city-states' rapid demise. Right after saying that "the polis was supposed to multiply the occasions to win 'immortal fame,' " she observes,

One, if not the chief, reason for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens, *as well as for the hardly less surprising swift decline of the city-state*, was precisely that from beginning to end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence. (§27:197 [italics added])

Severed from the argument of §27, that statement might be taken as no more than a sign of the sometimes tragic sensibility for which Arendt, in other contexts, is justly known.³⁰ But if the city's primary task was to guarantee perpetual life for its citizens' fame, without any assistance from poets or other memorialists, then its inability to sustain itself is not simply a failure but a failure on its own terms: this unsurprising fate undermines the city's whole "*raison d'être*."³¹ And indeed, when Arendt speaks of Pericles again in the following section (§28), she remarks that his speech "has always been read by the sad wisdom of hindsight by men who knew that his words were spoken at the beginning of the end" (§28:205). Not all failures are tragic: this one is only ironic, and that is the wisdom of hindsight that Arendt expected her readers to share.

Near the very end of "The Greek Solution," Arendt makes a rather too subtle, yet nonetheless decisive shift away from the polis as she had been describing it thus far. "The polis, *properly speaking*," she says, "is *not* the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and *its true space* lies between people living together for this purpose, *no matter where* they happen to be" (§27:198 [italics added]). She immediately goes on to identify this with her own idea of the public realm, calling it "the space of appearances in the widest sense of the word." Here, for the first time, she directly equates the polis as public realm (the idea from chapter 2) with the notion of a "space of appearances" introduced in chapter 5. But note that if this is the polis "*properly speaking*," then the Greeks' own "self-interpretation" of it—a fixed structure "physically secured by the wall around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws"—is not. To see the difference even more clearly, consider these two statements, the first from her gloss on Pericles' speech, and the next from the paragraph that immediately follows it, where she refers instead to this other, portable polis, "the polis properly speaking":

It is as though the walls of the polis and the boundaries of the law were drawn around an already existing public space which, however, *without such stabilizing protection could*

not endure, could not survive the moment of action and speech itself. (§27:198 [italics added])

“Wherever you go, there you will be a polis”: these famous words became not merely the watchword of Greek colonization, they expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which *can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere*. (§27:198 [italics added])

If we may set aside the fact that she confusingly provides a (different) Greek pedigree for each of these conceptions, it should be obvious that they are very unlike one another and in fact nearly opposites. In the first case it is “as though” an “already existing” public space needed to be hermetically sealed behind a barricade of walls and wall-like laws. In the second, the space of appearances is created through the activities of action and speech themselves and “can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere.” Strange as it may sound, she can only mean to imply that Pericles had spoken improperly, as it were: the polis—and hence the “space of appearances”—is not, “properly speaking,” what he or his peers had wished to believe. Unlike her Greeks, Arendt herself believes that a space for freedom is possible in any situation “where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly” (§27:198-99). And by rejecting the Greeks’ idea that the singularity of deeds could be preserved through a wall-like cordon of law, she also repudiates any basis for their belief that the public realm need be reserved for the grandiose deeds of a few famous men.

V

“The Greek Solution” is no anomaly in *The Human Condition*. Well before this section, a careful reader would have ample reason to doubt Arendt’s allegiance to the Greeks’ own ideas about all three of the activities analyzed in the book. Their confused wish to “emancipate” action from work is already prefigured early in chapter 3, “Labor.” There, in seeking to explain why they had overlooked the distinctions she herself makes between labor and work, she remarks,

Contempt for laboring, originally arising out of a passionate striving for freedom from necessity and a no less passionate impatience with every effort that left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance, spread with the increasing demands of polis life upon the time of the citizens and its insistence on their abstention (*skhole*) from all but political activities, until it covered *everything* that demanded an effort. (§11:81 [italics added])

Let's get this straight: the original contempt that had made the Greeks so impatient with every effort that "left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance" eventually spread to exactly the activity most directly involved leaving traces, monuments, and great works—and merely because the citizens were too busy in their frantic competition for fame to put in the effort. Even more telling, though, is a later passage in this same chapter, where she caustically criticizes the Greeks (and also, this time, the Romans) for forcing the burden of labor on others:

The price for the elimination of life's burden from the shoulders of all citizens [i.e., of "the ancient city-state"] was *enormous* and by no means consisted only in the *violent injustice* of forcing one part of humanity into the darkness of pain and necessity. Since this darkness is natural, inherent in the human condition . . . the price for absolute freedom from necessity is life itself, or rather the substitution of vicarious life for real life. (§16:119-20 [italics added])

To be sure, this much-neglected passage is just about the only place in *The Human Condition* where Arendt directly denounces the ancients' dependence on slaves and the subjugation of women. Yet its very wording suggests that this may be so simply because she assumes that its "violent injustice" goes without saying. More to the point, though, is the fact that she criticizes the practice not only for its injustice, but also for the loss of "real life" on the part of its would-be beneficiaries. It is a loss entirely consonant with the folly she ascribes to the men of the polis in "The Greek Solution."

None of this invalidates Arendt's initial appeal, back in chapter 2, to the polis as an exemplary instance of a genuinely "political" public realm. It does, however, oblige us to reconsider precisely what had been at stake in that appeal. The true relevance of the Greek polis to Arendt's own politics lies simply in the fact that when citizens "left" their households, they were able to comport with one another as if they were unconstrained by natural necessity. Her critique of modern society is not simply a complaint about how highly we moderns value labor, as if the Greeks' contrasting contempt for it were a self-evident normative standard. Her concern, rather, is the insidious consequences she saw in the fact that modern society is *organized* around labor—the fact that the organizations that employ most of our time and attention, like it or not, are those through which we make our living. She traces the enormous expansion of economic activity in our era to the "emancipation" of the laboring activity from its former obscurity (and security) in the private household, a process that began with the expropriation of the peasantry in early modern times.³² The modern 'division of labor' that this process made possible is for Arendt only "so-called," for it arises not from labor itself but from the capacity to organize human relationships, and that is of course a fac-

ulty of *action*.³³ The modern economy thus puts action at the service of labor and consumption; it is in this sense that Arendt speaks of labor's invasion of the public realm. The consequence of that continuing development, from Arendt's perspective, has been to impose the unfreedom inherent in labor on the whole fabric of human relationships. For her, modern society's deepest threat to human freedom is this: to the extent we allow ourselves to be identified with our jobs, or with the status our jobs afford us, it will make sense for us to ascribe unchosen aims and uniform motives to one another's behavior, a form of *explanation* that is modally incompatible with our recognizing one another as free, acting beings.

"To have a society of laborers," she remarks at one point, "it is of course not necessary that every member actually be a laborer or worker . . . but only that all members *consider* what they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families" (§6:46 [italics added]). By the logic of her argument, though, this corollary must also be true: to have more than a society of laborers—to have a genuinely political public realm—there is no intrinsic reason why everyone might not be a laborer or worker, so long as we are able to interact (and understand our interactions) on a footing independent of our economic function or social status. Nor is there any reason why those interactions need consist in deeds of a special, rarefied kind, removed from our mundane affairs.³⁴ For Arendt's aim in *The Human Condition* is not to set parameters for some kind of specially privileged "authentic" politics, nor is it to prescribe some kind of existential *eudaimonia*. What she laments was not so much an absence of action in our time as a failure to see it for what it is. Action, as she rightly understands it, is present in every human life; the web of human relationships is present wherever men live together (§24:176; §25:184). But the *extent* of our freedom to act—that is, the range of what we are able to do, with respect to the relationships—depends in large measure on the extent to which we are able to regard one another as acting beings. If we cannot make sense of what is being done around us *as* action—if we cannot attach a name and a story to the conduct that affects us—then our comprehension is thwarted, and so too is our capacity to respond in kind.³⁵ To the extent that the normalized expectations of society occlude this recognition, we are immobilized, vulnerable to harms we can neither make sense of nor answer with actions of our own.³⁶ That is the danger she has in mind when she warns, "The rule by nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions" (§6:40).

Arendt may not fully follow through on the political implications of her theory in *The Human Condition*, but we could readily imagine a sequel in which she did. It would perhaps have been a book in which she returned to a

theme she had written about before, political evil, a topic that might have allowed her to explore just how cruel and tyrannical that “rule of nobody” may at times turn out to be. That is, it could have been an occasion for her to warn against the horrors that can be wrought by political criminals who so singularly fail to “make an appearance as a ‘someone’ among others,” we ourselves may be lulled into regarding them as no more than anonymous, job-holding functionaries—mere “cogs” in an impersonal social machine. But then we do not need to imagine that hypothetical sequel to *The Human Condition*, because of course Arendt did go on to write exactly that book: *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the “report on the banality of evil” that she published in 1963. *The Human Condition*’s theory of action is what informs that later book’s concluding judgment, a peroration addressed directly to its subject, the Nazi official Adolf Eichmann—a man who claimed he was merely doing his job:

You . . . said that your role in the Final Solution was an accident and that almost anybody could have taken your place. . . . What you meant to say was that where all, or almost all, are guilty, nobody is. This is indeed a quite common conclusion, but it is one we are not willing to grant you. . . . Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it was nothing more than misfortune that made you a willing instrument in the organization of mass murder; there still remains the fact that you have carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder. For politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same.³⁷

Modern “society,” as Arendt understood it, *is* rather like a nursery: an overly solicitous household organized in the service of incessant bodily needs. But politics is not like that—or at least, we need not be resigned to regard it as such. Should an evildoer like Eichmann decline to “step into appearances” of his own accord, it may be incumbent on us to flush him out—which is precisely what Arendt seeks to do in her book about him. For politics is never merely unchosen behavior; if we ourselves are to be free to act—and to face up to political evil—we must be ready to see that “obedience” is always also the sum of the stories of specific individuals’ active support. And that is no less true now, with society ascendant, than it ever had been in antiquity.

NOTES

1. W. H. Auden, “Thinking What We Are Doing,” *Encounter*, 12 (June 1959): 74. (A review of Arendt’s *The Human Condition*; first published in *The Griffin*, September 1958.)

2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), henceforth abbreviated as *HC* or cited by section and page number only.

3. For notable examples of these three criticisms, respectively, see Hauke Brunkhorst, "Equality and Elitism in Arendt," *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (New York: Cambridge, 2000), 183-84 ff.; George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 39; and Hanna Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Public and Private," *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (1981).

4. It is for this reason, for instance, that Seyla Benhabib has written a book-length study with the explicit aim "to de-center the place of *The Human Condition* in our reading of Hannah Arendt." Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), xxv; see also p. 118.

5. Jacques Taminiaux, "Performativité et Grécomanie?" *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53, no. 2 (1999): 191-205. An adaptation of the article has recently appeared as "Greeks and Romans," *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 165-77.

6. Margaret Canovan's influential 1992 study has already cast substantial doubt on Arendt's supposedly unqualified esteem for the polis; she refers extensively to negative statements about the classical Greeks that are to be found in unpublished manuscripts of Arendt's dating from the period leading up to *The Human Condition*'s composition (see note 32). Yet Canovan, too, effectively abandons *The Human Condition* itself to its critics on this score, contending that the published book should be given no special standing among those unpublished manuscripts as an authoritative statement of Arendt's beliefs—a contention I myself find both untenable and needless. See Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge, 1992), 100-1, 135-43.

7. Hannah Arendt, *Vita activa: oder Vom tätigen Leben* (Stuttgart, Germany: Kolhammer, 1960). Specific citations in this essay refer to the unaltered paperback edition currently in print (München, Germany: Piper, 1981); they are indicated with the abbreviation VA and follow the same format as those for *The Human Condition*. (All translations from Arendt's German are my own.) For publication details see Ursula Ludz's authoritative bibliography of Arendt's writings in Arendt, *Ich will verstehen: Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk*, ed. U. Ludz (München, Germany: Piper, 1996), 290.

8. So far as I know, the only critical study to date that notes the significance of some of the variant passages in the German-language text is Roland Schindler's *Rationalität zur Stunde Null: Mit Hannah Arendt auf dem Weg ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, Germany: Trafo, 1998), 197-201. See also Schindler, "Melancholische Denkerin der Moderne? Zur deutschen Ausgabe von Seyla Benhabibs Studie über Arendts politische Theorie," *Hannah Arendt Newsletter* no. 3 (2000), 32-37.

9. Although Arendt self-consciously uses the Latin term *vita activa* to allude to the ancient (and medieval) dichotomy between it and the *vita contemplativa* (for reasons that need not concern us here), it is important to note that she defines the former term as embracing 'labor', 'work', and 'action' on the basis of her own explicit stipulation, not on the authority of any historical practice or understanding (see §1:7).

10. In the cases of work and action, the correspondence between Arendt's and Aristotle's accounts is explicit, though her theoretical descriptions of each differ from his in a number of significant ways (see §27:195). The connection between 'labor' and Aristotle's understanding of "nutritive" activity is left implicit, but is no less apparent on inspection (see §13:96 and §20:150-51). Cf. Aristotle, *Physics*, II.1, III.1-3; *On the Soul*, II.4.

11. Cf. Martin Braun, *Hannah Arendts transzendentaler Tätigkeitsbegriff: Systematische Rekonstruktion ihrer politischen Philosophie im Blick auf Jaspers und Heidegger* (Frankfurt, Germany: Lang, 1993). Braun's is the only study of Arendt's thought of which I am aware that gives due attention to the fact that Arendt's theory of human activities consists of arguments that

are “transcendental” in the Kantian sense. My account of those arguments differs significantly from his, however.

12. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A11/B24 ff.

13. In these sections of *The Human Condition*, Arendt presents the Kantian problematic with which she contended only obliquely, without referring to Kant by name. She frames the issue more directly in “What Is Freedom?” a roughly contemporaneous essay. See Arendt, “What Is Freedom?” *Between Past and Future*, 2d ed. (1960; reprint, New York: Viking, 1977), 144-45.

14. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A444/B476-A451/B479, A538/B566-A558/B586.

15. The following synopsis of Arendt’s argument in §§24-26 departs significantly from the leading critical accounts of her theory of action. I do not have the space here to defend adequately what is likely to be controversial in my interpretation, namely, my implicit denial of the prevailing opinion that Arendt’s claims in those sections refer only to “political action” in some highly restricted sense. (That opinion tends to color the usual interpretations of her notions of what constitutes the “disclosure of identity,” an “enacted story,” and so forth.) But lest it appear that I am in this way begging the principal questions regarding her stance toward the polis, let me just note that my detailed reading of §27, “The Greek Solution,” later on in this essay is not, strictly speaking, dependent on that denial in any way. Considering the fact that Arendt did not herself generally use the term *political* to qualify the term *action* in §§24-26, it seems to me that the presumption that she is referring only to action in some narrowly political sense is plausible only if this part of the text is assumed in advance to be directly continuous with her comments elsewhere in the book about the Greeks’ beliefs.

16. The exact conceptual relation Arendt understands between the temporal closure of an individual’s life, bounded by an actual birth and death, and that of a particular action is somewhat obscure. I take it that the two are meant to be analogous: the one with respect to the physical world, the other with respect to the “space of appearances” arising from human relationships. See §24:176-77; compare §13:97.

17. Strangely, none of the recent comparative studies of Arendt and her sometime teacher Martin Heidegger have discussed the relationship between Arendt’s idea of “enacted stories” in §26 of *The Human Condition* and Heidegger’s idea of the “historicity” of (human) existence in *Being and Time* (1927). (In the German *Vita activa*, Arendt self-consciously uses the same word, ‘Geschichte’, for both ‘story’ and ‘history’. See VA §25:226-27.) During the period in which Arendt had studied with him (the years that he was at work on what became *Being and Time*), although not later, Heidegger too had sought to supplement Kant’s transcendental categories to make them adequate to lived historical experience (see Jeffrey Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* [Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Nijhoff, 1988], 211-22). The importance of the affinity between Arendt and Heidegger in this respect is that it draws attention to her implicit thesis that the (always) already existing “web of human relationships” is responsible for the meaningfulness of action by virtue of the (temporal) expectations inherent in those relationships (analogous to Heidegger’s idea of Dasein’s temporally “projected” meanings). The principal difference between their theories, in this respect—to put the matter far too briefly—is that Heidegger considers “historicity” in the context of an ineluctably finite, first-person existence, while Arendt’s analysis is inflected more conventionally in the third person—a simple change with far-reaching philosophical implications.

18. The German edition clarifies this point, noting that “speechless” acts may still be comprehended, but only deficiently. See VA §24:216, cf. HC §24:178.

19. See Schindler, *Rationalität zur Stunde Null*, 199.

20. In this way, the German version resolves an unfortunate ambiguity in the original text by making it clear that by “appearance” in this context Arendt means the *event* of appearing: not a

person's demeanor or display, as it were, but rather his arrival on the scene. See VA §24:214; cf. HC §24:176.

21. See §23:173, §25:181.

22. See also §31:221-22.

23. See Taminiaux, "Performativité et Grécomanie?" 199-200.

24. Arendt is quoting Thucydides, 2.41.

25. The fact that the Homeric poems were not originally written down does not make them any less instances of 'works' (rather than simply 'speech') for Arendt; she holds that a poem's "durability" derived from the crafted "density" of its language. See §23:169-70.

26. To avoid misunderstanding, let me note that there is an essential difference between the erroneous position Arendt ascribes to Pericles here—that the meaning of an action must remain untouched by its outcome—and another position that she herself holds, namely, that the meaning of singular actions must not be subsumed into supra-personal historical processes. With respect to the latter position, she frequently insists on the prerogative of retrospective judgment to take the side of the defeated. (See Arendt, "The Concept of History," *Between Past and Future*, 75-86.) But that is not to say that we are to do so by ignoring the fact of defeat.

27. See, for instance, Kateb, "Political Action: Its Nature and Advantages," *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 139; Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1993), 79; Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 54.

28. The German-language edition contains a remarkable addition to "The Frailty of Human Affairs" (§26), in which Arendt suggests that the Greeks' futile effort to contain action's "boundlessness" by limiting the number of people allowed in their public realm was itself a factor in their cities' instability. See VA §26:237.

29. "Der politische Bereich im Sinne der Griechen gleicht einer solchen immerwährenden Bühne, auf der es gewissermaßen nur ein Auftreten, aber kein Abtreten gibt" (VA §27:249).

30. Cf. J. Peter Euben, "Arendt's Hellenism," *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 151-64.

31. Arendt made this exact criticism of the polis more succinctly but without comparable theoretical depth in "Philosophy and Politics," a posthumously published lecture from 1954. See Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (spring 1990): 82. Cf. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, 137-38.

32. See §6:47, §8:66. Arendt's emphasis on the baleful consequences of the "emancipation of labor" has often been mistakenly read as evidence for a prejudice against the working (i.e., laboring) class—a prejudice thought to be related to her supposed admiration for the ancient Greeks. This mistake could have been averted had Arendt been more clear that both her choice of words and the underlying idea are taken directly from none other than Karl Marx, who had no less sardonically referred to this very same phenomenon as the "emancipation" of the peasantry from its proprietary share in the (feudal) means of production, the event that created a landless proletariat "free" to be exploited in ever more efficient ways by the capitalist labor market. See Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. B. Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), chap. 27, 877 ff. That is not to say that Arendt accepts all of Marx's analysis: one of her subsidiary aims in *The Human Condition* is indeed to contest the basis for his hope that the consummation of labor's "socialization" under capitalism would in due course lead to full human emancipation.

33. See §6:47, §16:123.

34. That is why it is no paradox to say that the true heroes of *The Human Condition*—if any be needed—are not the Athenians but the revolutionary workers of the modern European labor movement. Shortly after "The Greek Solution" (i.e., in §30, "The Labor Movement"), she goes so far as to say that "when the labor movement appeared on the public scene, it was the only orga-

nization in which men acted and spoke qua men—and not qua members of society” (§30:219). The theoretical crux of her argument in that section lies in the statement immediately following that one: “for this political and revolutionary role of the labor movement . . . it is decisive that the economic activity of its members was incidental.” This is a topic that Arendt would take up in much greater detail (but perhaps without the same incisive theoretical depth) in her later book, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963).

35. The kind of mutual recognition at issue need not rise to the level of ethical reciprocity, as the example of the Greek agon itself makes clear. That is not to say that ethical relationships do not matter to her, though, only that her theoretical concern is with something that is conceptually antecedent to them—in fact, a condition of their possibility. Cf. Schindler, “Melancholische Denkerin der Moderne?” 37.

36. This is a point that Arendt had made more vividly in an earlier book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 302:

If a Negro in a white community is considered a Negro and nothing else, he loses along with his right to equality that freedom of action which is specifically human [as] all his deeds are now explained as “necessary” consequences of some “Negro” qualities; he has become some specimen of some animal species, called man.

37. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 2d ed. (New York: Viking, 1964), 279. The pivotal last claim, that “in politics obedience and support are the same,” is one that Arendt made verbatim in other works of hers as well. See *On Revolution*, 228; Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, 1972), 140.

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