HANNAH ARENDT: RE-THINKING "THE SOCIAL"

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This work connects two central texts by Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition* and *Thinking,* volume one of *The Life of the Mind.* My approach will be to examine the rise of "the social" as outlined in *The Human Condition*, followed by a consideration of Arendt's response to this rise in *Thinking.* In doing so we will observe that both action and thought are grounded in the human condition of plurality.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

i) Modernity

We live in an age in which the central role of politics is to facilitate unrestrained economic progress. Indeed, this is the criterion according to which political leadership is now measured. Thus does economics, currently at the very heart of political life, also come to dominate our ethical self-understanding. Moreover, our rapidly accelerating economic globalization seems to have become an irreversible characteristic of modernity, such that, in our current market-driven culture, all things become objects of consumption. Yet, we remain tragically limited in our ability to discern the forces that transform all things in the world into commodities and all human beings into automatons, themselves commodified through their thoughtless and relentless preoccupation with the cycle of consumption and production.

We can see this dynamic in various phenomena, most notably, in the fiscal backgrounds of many of our modern political leaders as well as in the fiscal character of modern political speech. Note the recent trend in which Canadian political leaders have risen to power from previous positions as Minister of Finance. Examples include Ontario's new premier, Ernie Eaves, who rose from that position to become the successor to Mike Harris, Ontario's Progressive Conservative premier between 1995 and 2002. Similarly, Stockwell Day, former Finance Minister of Alberta, rose to

become federal leader of the Canadian Alliance. Further, Paul Martin, Canada's former Minister of Finance, appears likely to replace Chretien as Canada's Prime Minister.

The modern understanding of political leadership and of the nature of political rule was exemplified in the response of the Bush administration to the tragic events of September 11, 2001. In the months following that event, Bush repeatedly called upon the American people to express their patriotic commitment and their resistance against terrorism through shopping. In short, America's well being was seen as contingent on "consumer confidence," which political leaders assumed responsibility for both inspiring and sustaining. In Canada (and in a somewhat similar vein), Chretien recently stated that the reduction of poverty and starvation in Africa should be understood neither as a humanitarian act nor as an issue of social justice, but purely in economic and instrumental terms. Africans, too, he insisted, must be trained in the role of consumers. "It is not charity, it's an investment, because if you take somebody who is very poor and you make that person less poor then he becomes a consumer of goods and services from the developed world."[1] Such language has even entered the field of education, where students are now referred to as "consumers" and where academic disciplines are increasingly valued by both students and their parents in relation to their potential to lead to lucrative employment.

In the province of Ontario, in 1995, the Progressive Conservative government swept into power under the leadership of Mike Harris and was re-elected by a wide

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[1] The Globe and Mail, "Canada, Britain optimistic on G8 Africa deal," Tuesday, May 14, 2002.

margin in 2000. In a recent speech, Harris insisted that "what matters most to [the people of Ontario] is prudent management of their money." He pointed to two models of such "prudence": family households and small businesses. Concerning the former, Harris stated that "every day, hard-working families across this great province make responsible decisions about their own budgets. They expect governments to do the same. Even when those decisions are difficult."[2] Concerning the latter, the government proclaimed its intention to "embrace the innovation demonstrated by so many successful small businesses."[3] While no one would challenge the principal of fiscal responsibility, what these examples demonstrate is the extent to which economic concerns have succeeded in rising to an unchallenged position of political dominance. By describing the task of political rule in terms of economic efficiency (appealing to his voters by championing the household and small business, both central to those voters' concerns), Harris shows the extent to which political speech has become captured by an aggressive fiscal ideology and political practice reduced to that of administering an economy.

These examples, drawn from recent public statements by Ontario's provincial government, reflect some of the dominant assumptions of modernity, assumptions that cross provincial borders and political boundaries. They are the logical outcome of the historical usurpation of politics by the instrumental concerns of economic utility.

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2 The Budget of the Province of Ontario, February, 2001: www.gov.on.ca/Fin/bud01e/bud_highlights.htm.

3 Ibid.

ii) Arendt's response to modernity

In *The Human Condition,* Hannah Arendt exposes the modern reversal of the classical relationship between public and private "spheres". This work outlines Arendt's reconstruction of the nature of political existence and culminates in an insistence on the importance both of political action and political plurality. What today is widely held to be politics is, in Arendt's view, not politics at all. Rather, it is only a preoccupation with the anti-political activities of production and consumption, with the private concerns that are central to "the human condition of life".

Arendt attempts to release us from the bonds of deceptive political language that characterize modern political discourse. In doing so, she extends the meaning of politics far beyond our reductionist modern understanding. The political speech cited in the previous section exemplifies Arendt's assertion that, in modernity, "the dividing line is entirely blurred" between "the public and private realms, between the sphere of the *polis* and the sphere of the household and family."[4] Further, Arendt exposes the insidious rise of "the social," including the rise of the *oikos* or 'household' (that is to say, the rise "of economic activity to the public realm") [HC 33]. However, she argues that "household life exists for the sake of the 'good life' in the *polis*" [HC 37], the *polis* understood as the locus of plurality and political action. Indeed, *The Human Condition* is characterized by a profound sense of the importance of politics and an unwavering commitment to the public sphere.

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[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 28. Hereafter, HC.

iii) Outline

Few thinkers have provoked to the same extent as Hannah Arendt, from those who would seek a call to egalitarian political action, to those who would insist on an elitist and anti-democratic politics. Communitarians, on the other hand, have appreciated her elevation of the public sphere as a locus of commitment, communication and togetherness. Such writers as Seyla Benhabib and Jurgen Habermas attempt to portray Arendt's account of action as a consensus-driven undertaking of dialogue, deliberation and agreement on the part of rational and autonomous agents. However, this approach disregards Arendt's account of the inadequacy of both *animal laborans* and the private sphere, not to mention the inadequacies of "the social". Furthermore, communitarians overlook her non-instrumental and non-teleological account of action.

Recent years have seen the growth of critical theory, a field that opens new directions for Arendt scholars. Julia Kristiva, for example, applies critical theory and literary analysis to Arendt's consideration of speech, storytelling, and the "disclosure of who", as witnessed by others.[5] Paul Ricoeur has undertaken an insightful consideration of narrative action within *The Human Condition,* as political action relates to the

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[5] Julia Kristeva, *Three women in dark times : Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, or Amor fati, amor mundi / Sylvie Courtine-Denamy*, translated from the French by G.M. Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

"temporal experience underlying Arendt's philosophical anthropology."[6] In spite of the bold insights of both of these thinkers, they have neglected the darker counterpart of Arendt's thought, namely her account of the rise of "the social".

I shall not attempt to reconcile these various interpretations, but rather merely indicate some of their strengths and weaknesses. Throughout this thesis, I shall stay close to Arendt's work as I articulate both her account of the rise of "the social" and her responses to that rise. In Chapter Two, I present Arendt's central distinctions and their modern reversals, which culminate in her notion of "the social". That there is such a close parallel between "the social" and the modern political dynamics described at the beginning of this thesis, I take as my starting point. I shall also point out the inadequacies of the only other extensive study of "the social" in Arendt scholarship, namely, that undertaken by Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, who claims that "the social" is a "confused", "contradictory", and even "meaningless concept."[7] I shall also criticize the association of Arendt's activities with social categories, such as 'class', rather than their corresponding "spheres" and "conditions".

In Chapter Three I consider several possible resolutions to the problem of "the social" that Arendt presents in *The Human Condition*, including the "redemptive" qualities of "higher activities", the "potentialities of action", and the "ontological roots of action". I turn next to Arendt's treatment of revolutions, her modern paradigm for

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6 Paul Ricoeur, "Action, Story, and History: On Re-reading *The Human Condition,*" *Salmagundi* 60 (Summer 1983) : 72.

7 Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, *The attack of the blob: Hannah Arendt's concept of the social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.

political action, as outlined in *On Revolution.*[8] I shall show that these possibilities, in contrast to what some of her critics state, are neither based on "Hellenic Nostalgia"[9] nor are "devoid of content".[10]

The shortcomings of these resolutions will lead us, in our Fourth chapter, to a consideration of the faculty of thought and the activity of thinking as found in *Thinking,* Volume one of *The Life of the Mind.*[11] While Arendt referred occasionally to thinking in *The Human Condition*, she held it to be "outside the scope of these considerations" [HC 236] (i.e. those she addresses in *The Human Condition*). Yet thinking formed the underlying project of *The Human Condition,* insofar as her stated task in this work was to "think what we are doing" [HC 5]. Although she stated that thinking was "the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable", and that "thoughtlessness...seems to be among the outstanding characteristics of our time" [HC 5], thinking was not specifically explored until Volume one of *The Life of the Mind.* Therefore, following an account of Arendt's understanding of thinking, our fourth chapter examines the extent to which thought may respond to "the social". We shall find that insofar as "the soundless solitary dialogue we call thinking" [LOM 190]

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8 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1977). Hereafter, OR.

9 Noel O'Sullivan, "Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society," in *Contemporary Political Philosophers*, edited by de Crespigny and Minogue (New York: Dodds, Mead, 1975) : 228-251.

10 Kimberly Curtis, *Our sense of the real: aesthetic experience and Arendtian politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 17.

11 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). Hereafter, LOM.

points to the "infinite plurality which is the law of the earth" [LOM 187], thinking is grounded in the human condition of plurality and its loss results from a "rebellion" against "human existence". As a result, we shall see that there is a correspondence between the categories of action and thought, between inner plurality and political plurality, between psyche and polity, between appearance and the inner, and between the life of the citizen and the life of the mind. Although there may be some truth to Leah Bradshaw's insistence on "the dramatic shift in Arendt's emphasis on the life of the mind in the latter part of her intellectual development,"[12] I would assert that there is continuity, based on the extent to which Arendt connects political plurality to the inner plurality of thought. We shall see that the common ground of plurality does not resolve these distinctions, but rather shows how, in spite of the modern elevation of "the human condition of life", plurality perseveres nonetheless.

Next, I present several criticisms of Arendt, including her problematic distinction between Plato and Socrates, and her suspension of political prescriptions. Finally, I observe that perhaps the most helpful criterion by which to measure the "success" of Arendt lies not in her applicability or "usefulness"; for it was never her intention to offer specific or pragmatic political prescriptions (these are standards she herself abhors). Rather, by engaging in our own "inner dialogue", her ideas can illuminate the modern world, broaden our own intellectual horizons, and therefore encourage us to resist the rising threat of the "thoughtlessness" of "the social"

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12 Leah Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 100.

CHAPTER TWO: THE RISE OF "THE SOCIAL"—

CONTEXT AND CRISIS

I. CONTEXT

i) Arendt's distinctions

Although Arendt rarely commented on her own method, we can see that *The Human Condition* centers on the task of making and sustaining distinctions. In a dialogue between Arendt and Eric Voegelin, published in the Review of Politics, Arendt responds to Voegelin's critique of the approach she used in *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* stating that her "chief quarrel with the present state of the historical and political sciences is their growing incapacity for making distinctions. Terms...are used indiscriminately for all kinds of political phenomena...and none of them is any longer understood with its particular historical background. The result is a generalization in which the words themselves lose all meaning."[13] Perhaps as a response to this "chief quarrel," her own making of distinctions was applied most rigorously five years later when she wrote *The Human Condition.* In this work we see Arendt as a veritable architect of distinctions, as constructing a complex hierarchy of interdependent concepts that cover a broad range of human experiences.

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[13] Eric Voegelin, "Review of Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism",* *Review of Politics* 15 (January 1953): 82-83.

The basis for Arendt's distinctions frequently lies in her appeal to the ancient meanings of certain terms (such as her use of the term *oikos* to refer to the household or the private sphere) that she evokes in order to reawaken us to the dangers inherent in the erosion of language through history. Further, in revisiting the pre-philosophic experience of political life in the Periclean *polis* in her search for etymological origins, she recovers ancient distinctions. For example, she begins her chapter on labour by insisting that while the distinction between the terms 'labor' and 'work' might appear unusual, it is based on the striking "phenomenal evidence in its favor...that every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have come to think of as the same activity, and retains them in the face of their persistent synonymous usage" [79-80]. In the preface to a collection of essays, entitled *Between Past and Future*, Arendt states that her concern is "to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distill from them anew their original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the very key words of political language...leaving behind empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts, regardless of their underlying phenomenal reality" [BPF 15].

Indeed, for Arendt, history itself chronicles the blurring and ultimate loss of distinctions. The modern decline "within the historical and political sciences" in the ability to distinguish has resulted in a crisis within the modern age itself, namely, the "extraordinary difficulty with which we...understand the decisive division between the public and private realms" [HC 28]. She argues that only when these distinctions are once again acknowledged and honed can politics can be understood on its own terms.

She contends, moreover, that the human capacity to distinguish is essential both to the discipline of political science and to maintaining the public sphere and human existence in it. It is this capacity that rescues us from destroying our sense of reality, from descending into the "thoughtless" existence of "the social". In short, Arendt's project begins in her championing of language's remarkable capacity to preserve meaning and distinctions.

We will consider next some of the central distinctions Arendt addresses in *The Human Condition* and will proceed by differentiating between the active and contemplative lives, by examining the "basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man" [HC 7], and by identifying the activities within the *vita activa* to which the conditions correspond. These activities and conditions will then be located in and related to their respective "spheres".

Vita contemplative and vita activa

At the apex of Arendt's hierarchy of distinctions is the distinction she draws between the two "ways of life": the *vita activa* (the life of action) and the *vita contemplativa* (the life of contemplation). However, these are not simply ways of life carried on in isolation from one another. Indeed, Arendt laments that "the term *vita activa* receiv[ed] its meaning from the *vita contemplativa*" [HC 16] and thereby "blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself" [HC 17]. For Arendt, the *vita activa* grew out of "the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis*" [HC 12], and entails the activities of labor, work, and action. The *vita contemplativa*, on the other hand, refers to Plato and Aristotle, as well as to the later rise of

Christianity. While the *vita activa* refers to "a life devoted to public-political matters" [HC 12], the *vita contemplativa* represents a "life of the philosopher devoted to inquiry into, and contemplation of, things eternal" [HC 13]. It is the "conscious cessation of activities," a state of stillness or of passive speechlessness [HC 291] that is "untranslatable into words" [HC 302]. This philosophic *apolitia* expresses disdain towards the "unquiet" *polis* life, insofar as such a life demands "freedom and surcease from political activity" [HC 14]. Arendt asserts that the entire project of Plato's political philosophy "is not only directed by the superior insight of the philosopher but has no aim other than to make possible the philosopher's way of life" [HC 14]. She further asserts that his philosophy influenced "the later Christian claim to be free from entanglement in worldly affairs" [HC 14].

According to Arendt, the distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* also corresponds to the distinction between eternity and immortality: "'Contemplation' is the word given to the experience of the eternal" [HC 20], an experience that arose out of the discovery that the *polis* did not "provide for all of man's higher activities" [HC 18]. The experience of the eternal "can only occur outside the realm of human affairs" [HC 20], that is to say, outside of the *vita activa*. While Arendt argues that eternity is linked to mortality, the striving for immortality "originally had been the spring and center of the *vita activa*" [HC 21] and is thus linked to human history, through which men can "attain an immortality of their own" [HC 19].

Conditions, activities, and spheres

According to Arendt, in turning to the *vita activa,* we find distinctions that do not correspond to the aforementioned "ways of life" but, rather, to human existence itself, to "the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man" [HC 7]. These three conditions are "the life process, worldliness, and plurality." The human condition also includes the "most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality" [HC 8]. Arendt emphasizes, however, that "the human condition is not the same as human nature" [HC 10] which latter term she considers indefinable, insofar as "only a god could know and define it" [HC 10]. Indeed, to Arendt, it "seems unknowable," in that for humans to define human nature would be akin to "jumping over our own shadow" [HC 10]. She adds that attempts to know and define our nature have too often resulted in the "construction of a deity" [HC 11]. Her distinguishing of the three "basic conditions"---life, worldliness, and plurality---that inform *The Human Condition* and the *vita activa* provides the ground for other of Arendt's distinctions, insofar as the former are unalterable features of human existence. Indeed, Arendt had intended originally to entitle this work, "The Vita Activa", but conceded that her "publisher wisely called [it] 'The Human Condition'" [LOM 6].

Arendt begins *The Human Condition* by distinguishing between the "fundamental human activities" of the *vita activa,* namely, labor, work, and action. She characterizes them as "fundamental" insofar as they correspond to the three aforementioned "basic conditions," with labor corresponding to the human condition of life itself; work, to worldliness; and action to plurality. She further contends that these

three activities correspond, in certain ways, either to "the private sphere" or *oikos* (which she associates with labor) or to "the public sphere" (which she associates with action). Between action and labor Arendt locates work; however, work is more ambiguous than either labor or action with respect to its correspondence to the two "spheres." She identifies both labor and work as "unpolitical ways of life" [HC 212], while identifying action with a political way of life. Arendt discusses labor, work, and action in that particular sequence (as do most who have commented on *The Human Condition).*[14] However, our discussion will begin with labor and the private sphere, will then proceed to consider action and the public sphere and, finally, will conclude with work. Following this pattern will allow one to see more clearly how each activity is linked to its worldly location.

Labor: For Arendt, labor is the activity that provides for the biological continuation of life, in which the human body "concentrates on nothing but its own being alive" [HC 115]. Based on this focus on the body and on the preservation of the biological species, the particular human condition to which labor corresponds is "life itself." Owing to this ongoing focus on "the maintenance of life" [HC 83], *animal laborans* (Arendt's construct that corresponds to labor) is irreversibly bound to the "ever-recurrent cyclical

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[14] Michael G. Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994); George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (New Jersey: Rownman & Allenhald, 1984); Martin Levin, "On *Animal Laborans* and *Homo Politicus," Political Theory* 7/4 (November 1979): 521-531; Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, *The attack of the blob: Hannah Arendt's concept of the social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Dana R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

movement of nature" [HC 96]. Arguing that "labor and consumption are but two stages in the ever-recurrent cycle of biological life" [HC 99], she contends that the products of labor are always immediately consumed. Hence, since no products of labor are lasting, labor, ultimately, is futile; it becomes "dominated" and even "enslaved by necessity" [HC 83]. Arendt further maintains that the uniqueness of individual humans is lost to the "uniformity" and "conformity" [HC 40, 41] of the labor process itself. Since, for Arendt, labor is an activity undertaken in isolation, it corresponds to the *oikos* or "household". Hence, to understand Arendt's concept of labor, we must consider not only its qualities as an activity but also its location in the "private realm".

The Private Realm: In describing this realm, Arendt emphasizes its "privative" character, arguing that "to live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life" [HC 58]. Because *animal laborans* is bound to necessity, he does not appear to others, thus remaining unable to communicate his experiences: "it is as though he did not exist" [HC 58]. Because of the absence of others and of the loss of the sense of reality that comes from being seen and heard, this "private realm" is described as a "mere togetherness" [HC 36]. Arendt further adds that insofar as the private realm is "the center of the strictest inequality" [HC 32], it is without freedom. Although she describes this realm as "privative," and although Arendt holds labour in low esteem, we will have misunderstood Arendt if we accuse her of dismissing its importance. Indeed, her intention is not to state that labor and the private realm are insignificant. Rather, for her, it is where one feels "sheltered against the world" [HC 59], a place where labor "should be hidden" [HC 72]. Indeed, the

significance of labor can be determined only to the extent that it contributes to higher activities within the *vita activa,* which ultimately it must serve if human existence is be considered worldly and free.

Action: According to Arendt, the obverse of labor is action, and it contrasts with labor both in terms of its location in the world and its importance within the *vita activa.* Action is the highest activity in which humans can engage, "the highest rank in the hierarchy of the *vita activa*" [HC 205]. Indeed, Arendt argues that a life without action is "literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men" [HC 176]. In each instance in which Arendt introduces action (in Chapters One and Five), she emphasizes its connection with plurality. "Action... corresponds to the human condition of plurality... [T]his plurality is specifically *the* condition of all political life" [HC 7]; moreover, "human plurality, [is] the basic condition of action" [HC 175]. She contends that both the meaning of the action and the identity of the actor can be established only in the context of human plurality, that is, in the presence of others who are able to understand and recognize the uniqueness of our acts. It is because of such plurality that action can be clearly distinguished from the "conformity" and "uniformity" of *animal laborans*, and from the "privative" character of the *oikos*.

However, for Arendt, action is not limited to "deeds" but is intimately bound to the human capacity for speech: "without the accompaniment of speech...action would not only lose its revelatory character...it would lose its subject...[S]peechless action would no longer be action" [HC 178-179]. The communicative and disclosive quality

of action implies that any deed is dependent for its transformation and reification upon speech. Indeed, speech, the "disclosure of 'who'" [HC 178], is the way in which the actor can become "immortal," a way in which his deeds may enter human history and be remembered. Thus "mortals... find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves" [HC 19]. She concedes that although labor may include "speech" of a sort, she insists that "no other human performance requires speech to the same extent as action" [HC 179]. She argues further, however, that speech in itself cannot "immortalize great deeds," nor can it facilitate remembrance outside of the presence of witnesses. Through subsuming speech under action, Arendt is able to connect action with "acting" and to connect "acting," in turn, with politics. These connections endow political action with a dramatic quality: "the theater is the political art *par excellence*" [HC 188].

Through characterizing action as performance and drama, Arendt underlines its improvisational nature, "its inherent unpredictability" [HC 191]. This unpredictability and unexpectedness ensures action's status as an end in itself, as subordinate to nothing outside or beyond itself. Action's unpredictability is identified with the newness and beginning to be found in the introduction of each unique person into the world; thus "action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality" [HC 9], the miracle of birth in which "the faculty of action is ontologically rooted" [HC 279].

Most commentators on Arendt, even those who generally are insightful, mistakenly align the human condition of plurality with other features of action. For

example, Dana Villa states that "plurality...is an achievement of action,"[15] while Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves states that, along with freedom, plurality is a "feature" of action: "The two central features of action are *freedom* and *plurality*."[16] However, plurality is no more an achievement of action than the human condition of life is an achievement of labor. To state that action "achieves" plurality or that plurality is a "feature" of action is to conflate something that action brings about with a "law of the earth."

The Public Sphere: We shall now turn to action's "location," that is, to the "public sphere." This capacity to act requires a location, as "before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the *polis*" [HC 195]. Just as Arendt holds action in high esteem, she also sees the *polis* as the place where we become fully human. Whereas labor is always solitary, action "is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act" [HC 188]. The *polis,* then, provides a place for human freedom: "freedom is exclusively located in the political realm" [HC 31]. Thus Arendt's distinction between the public and private spheres becomes a distinction between freedom and necessity: "between activities related to a common world and those related to the maintenance of life" [HC 28].

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15 Dana Villa, "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere," *American Political Science Review*, 86/3 (September 1992) : 717.

16 Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66.

Arendt identifies two "immortalizing" functions of the *polis*: first, "to multiply the occasions to win 'immortal fame'... [and] make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence" [HC 197]; and, second, "to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech...[so] that [a deed] actually would become immortal" [HC 197]. We now see that the function of the *polis* is to establish, for those who have acted, "the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and in future ages" [HC 197]. It is "a kind of organized remembrance. It assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men" [HC 198]. Arendt insists, however, that the continued existence of the *polis* requires ongoing action - both deeds and speech - in order to maintain itself as the realm of freedom, appearance, and reality. In short, according to Arendt, "power preserves the public realm" [HC 204].

Work: We will turn next to work, an intermediary activity between labor and action whose relationship with the public and private spheres is ambiguous. We begin by distinguishing work and labor, a distinction which, as indicated earlier, Arendt acknowledges as "unusual" [HC 79]. Work can be differentiated from labor on at least two levels: first, its relationship with nature and, second, the duration of its outcome. Whereas *animal laborans* is "bound to the recurring cycles of nature" [HC 98], *homo faber* "works upon" and values nature for its "use," and sees it as the "almost 'worthless material' upon which to work" [HC 155]. In encountering nature, *homo faber* reduces it to a means, shaping and transforming it according to human needs and

desires, thereby "instrumentalizing" it. In work, man is engaged in the endless process of resisting the persistent threat of being overwhelmed by the cyclical growth and decay of nature, of sustaining his existence in the face of nature. Whereas *animal laborans* "leaves nothing lasting" [HC 87], and its products are immediately consumed, work results in an enduring "human artifice". Rather than disappearing through consumption, the human artifice provides the "stability and solidity" of the man-made world, a "home for mortal men" [HC 173]. Work corresponds to the world, insofar as it is a world-building activity that creates a world apart from anything given in nature. Indeed, by constructing buildings and laws, *homo faber* creates the public world both physically and institutionally.

Work furnishes an arena for political action, a shared world that stands between and yet unites humans. Arendt uses a table as an exemplar of the human artifact, insofar as it "relates and separates men at the same time" [HC 52]. Examples of *homo faber* include the builder, the architect, the craftsperson, the artist, and the legislator. The environment in which *homo faber* encounters others and experiences "publicity" is the exchange market, as he "can find his proper relationship to other people only by exchanging his products with theirs" [HC 160]. However, the "togetherness" that arises in that location results from "the desire for products, not people" [HC 209], and thus differs from the political togetherness of the *polis*.

ii) History: philosophy and Christianity

Having examined the three activities of labor, action, and work with respect to their location in the world, we shall next turn to Arendt's account of how these activities emerged, historically, only to become, in her terms, "corrupted." Undertaking this task will allow both the larger historical project of *The Human Condition* and Arendt's own philosophy of history to become clearer. Arendt interprets history in terms of the three activities of the *vita activa* and their relationship with the *vita contemplativa.* We begin by returning to the distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa,* the apex of her hierarchy of distinctions. In Arendt's estimation, the life of action was held in the highest esteem in the Athenian *polis,* as corroborated by the writings of Thucydides, Homer, and the Tragedians, and in the life of Socrates.

For Arendt, the first critical attitude towards the *vita activa* is to be found in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Arendt argues that in the earliest stage of Western political thought, the *vita activa* was no longer considered as it had been experienced, but was interpreted through the "distorting" lens of philosophical contemplation: "traditionally, therefore, the term *vita activa* received its meaning from the *vita contemplativa*" [HC 16]. Arendt holds Plato and Aristotle responsible for having elevated the contemplation of eternal things above the *polis*, the *askholia* or "unquiet" of which they considered an impediment to philosophy. According to Arendt, this "conflict between the philosopher and the *polis*" [HC 12] rests on the philosophers' identification of freedom from necessity with "freedom and surcease from political action" [HC 14]. Furthermore, whereas philosophy was expected to be concerned with

the eternal, action and speech were concerned with immortalizing, with availing oneself of an opportunity to "win immortal fame" [HC 197]. For Plato, "concern with the eternal and the life of the philosopher are seen as inherently contradictory and in conflict with the striving for immortality, the way of life of the citizen, the *bios politikos*" [HC 20]. As a result of his concern with the eternal and his concomitant preference for freedom from action, Plato valued the *polis* only for its capacity to "serve the needs and wants of contemplation" [HC 16]: "we find [this concern] in Plato's political philosophy, where the whole utopian reorganization of *polis* life is...directed by the superior insight of the philosopher, but has no aim other than to make possible the philosopher's way of life." [HC 14] She further notes that such a view was not limited to Plato: "Aristotle's very articulation of the different ways of life...is clearly guided by the ideal of contemplation (*theoria*)" [HC 14].

Arendt contends that the distorting influence of the *vita contemplativa* not only elevated the *vita contemplativa* above the *vita activa*, it also brought about a distortion of the concepts of action and work. Arendt likens *homo faber's* reference to a model that is used in the process of "making" to the philosophers' adulation of the forms, stating that "in philosophy... contemplation and fabrication (*theoria* and *poiesis*) have an inner affinity" [HC 301]; moreover, "Plato...never failed to draw his examples from the field of making" [HC 142]. Hence, the fabrication or "making" associated with the activity of work came to be equated with the political task of "founding" or legislating (e.g., the "making" of laws). Whereas the ancient philosophers rejected the *vita activa*, they took from work the concepts both of fabrication and making, which they preferred

"because of ... [work's] greater reliability" [HC 195]. Although Arendt disagrees greatly with the ancient philosophers' positive views toward the *vita contemplative*, she shares with them their low regard for labor. However, whereas labor, for Arendt, serves the public sphere, for the philosophers, it is the *polis* itself that serves the *vita contemplativa.*

Having examined the philosophers' views of the *polis,* we shall next consider the rise of Christianity, an event which reinforced and intensified the aforementioned distortions, insofar as the philosophers' ancient hostility towards the *vita activa* was perpetuated in early Christianity: the "Christian claim to be free from entanglement in worldly affairs, from all the business of this world, was preceded by and originated in the philosophic *apolitia* of late antiquity" [HC 14-15]. Arendt adds that Christianity "conferred a religious sanction upon the abasement of the *vita activa* to its derivative, secondary position" [HC 16]. This "abasement" was compounded by Christian eschatology, specifically by the view that "the world itself is doomed and that every activity in it is undertaken with the proviso *quamdiu mundus durat* ('as long as the world lasts')" [HC 53]. This view contributed to "Christian otherworldliness" [HC 320] and, ultimately, to the "unpolitical, nonpublic character of the Christian community" [HC 53]. She adds, however, that these elements of Christianity did not in themselves suffice to erode the *vita activa*: "the fall of the Roman Empire plainly demonstrated that no work of mortal hands can be immortal" [HC 21]. As Arendt insists, the rise of Christianity and fall of the Roman Empire together undermined the "striving for immortality which had been the spring and center of the *vita activa*" [HC 21].

II) Crisis

i)The rise of "the social"

As mentioned earlier, Arendt resuscitated the original meaning of such concepts as the private sphere from their original Greek use. While the first assault on the *vita activa* was from the perspective of the *vita contemplativa,* Arendt states that the second assault came about as a result of a mistranslation of Aristotle's *"zoon politikon"* or politics, into the Latin *"animal socialis;"* the political thus became "the social". This mistranslation, "already found in Seneca...became the standard through Thomas Aquinas" [HC 23]. For Arendt, this "unconscious substitution of the social for the political betrays the extent to which the original Greek understanding of politics had been lost" [HC 23]. She further asserts that this mistranslation was responsible, in part, for ushering in the modern age itself; for provoking "the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, [but] is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age" [HC 28]. Thus, insofar as *The Human Condition* culminates in an urgent warning of the dangers that "the social" entails, it may be considered the most important concept in that text. Moreover, "the social" (unlike the *vita activa*), is not defined in opposition to the *vita contemplativa.* Rather, "the social" is characterized by the reversal of the hierarchy of activities within the *vita activa* itself. Arendt states that as a result of its concern with the eternal and its "otherworldly" orientation [HC 76, 320], Christianity oddly became characterized by a preoccupation with the "life process": "only with the rise of

Christianity, did life on earth also become the highest good of man" [HC 316]. Moreover, modern secularization has not succeeded in eroding the original Christian "belief in the sacredness of life" [HC 314], and it was this preoccupation with life that prepared the way for the elevation of labor. In short, once action, excluded by the philosophers, became "abased" by Christianity, the subsequent decline of contemplation resulted not in a corresponding ascent of action but, rather, the ascent of lowest of activities of the *vita activa*, namely, labor and the condition of "life itself." Arendt describes this process as follows: "Through society it is the life process itself which in one form or another has been channeled into the public realm...society constitutes the public organization of the life process itself...the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public" [HC 45-46].

There are several "labor theorists" whose writings have contributed to this dynamic. In particular, Arendt identifies John Locke, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx as theorists who (each in his own way) considered acquisition, property, exchange, and labor to be the highest human activities. The common element of these thinkers is their unprecedented elevation of the labor activity itself, now "considered to be the supreme world-building capacity of man" [HC 101]. Whereas philosophy and Christianity had already reversed the order of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, thereby causing a misconstrual of the activity of work, we see, in the ideas of these three "labor theorists," the most pronounced reversal within the *vita activa* itself: "The sudden,

spectacular rise of labor from the lowest, most despised position to the highest rank, as the most esteemed of all human activities, began when Locke discovered that labor is the source of all property. It followed its course when Adam Smith asserted that labor was the source of all wealth and found its climax in Marx's 'system of labor,' where labor became the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man" [HC 101]. However, Arendt insists that Locke, Smith, and Marx were "in the grip of certain genuine contradictions" [HC 101], insofar as labor is "the permanence of a process rather than the permanence of a stable structure" [HC 69], and consequently, labor "began to undermine the durability of the world" [HC 68].

Regarding the relationship between work and action, the making and fabrication of *homo faber* has absorbed the 'process' character of action and applied it to nature itself. Arendt has termed this dynamic "action into nature" [HC 320], a concept which has been the focus of a book-length study of *The Human Condition* by Canadian political theorist, Barry Cooper.[17] The result of *homo faber's* victory is "earthly alienation": "earthly alienation became and has remained the hallmark of modern science" [HC 264]. However, *homo faber's* rise was dominated, in turn, by *animal laborans* and by the human condition of life: "What needs explanation is not the modern esteem of *homo faber* but the fact that this esteem was so quickly followed by the elevation of laboring to the highest position in the hierarchical order of the *vita activa*" [HC 306]. This second reversal completed the decline from action, through

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17 Barry Cooper, *Action into Nature: An Essay on the Meaning of Technology* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

work, to labor, resulting in our modern state of worldly alienation. It is important to note that the modern decline did not stop with the establishment of the rule of *homo faber* and the threat of modern science but, rather, continued to the final "victory" of life and, therefore, the victory of "the social."

The rise of "the social" gave rise, in turn, to a corresponding sphere, namely, the "sphere of intimacy," which Arendt describes as a "rebellious reaction against society" [HC 39], an attempt to overcome the "leveling demands of the social" [HC 39]. Although the notion of the "sphere of intimacy" has been "enriched" by Rousseau and the Romantics, its "first articulate explorers" [HC 38], it remains the unfree location of inner subjectivity, a result of "a flight from the whole outer world" [HC 69]. Further, the sphere of intimacy is held to be inferior to the private realm, insofar as "the four walls of one's private property offer the only reliable hiding place from the common public world" [HC 71]. Although labor and property are a private concern of the *oikos*, the rise of intimacy does not entail a rise of the private sphere. Nor does the sphere of intimacy provide an ongoing and stable location outside society. Rather, so great is the momentum of "the social," that the private, public, and even the intimate realms themselves are each eroded and absorbed. In other words, the social "has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural; and it is against this growth...that the private and intimate, on the one hand, and the political...on the other, have proved incapable of defending themselves" [HC 47].

At this point we can outline the general characteristics of "the social". For Arendt, "the social" makes action itself impossible, for it "excludes the possibility of

action" [HC 40] and substitutes the uniqueness of each actor with the monotony, predictability, and conformity of "the social": the "phenomenon of conformism is characteristic of the last stage of this modern development" [HC 40]. In place of action, we find only "behavior": "society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement" [HC 40]. In modernity, behaviour is "by no means a harmless scientific ideal; it is the no longer secret political ideal of a society" [HC 43]. Arendt associates conformity and behaviour with "the modern science of economics, whose birth coincided with the rise of society and which, together with its chief technical tool, statistics, became the social science par excellence" [HC 42]. "The social", we can observe, is an elevation of economic and private concerns pertaining to the preservation and "maintenance of life" [HC 40], combined with explicitly other-related characteristics of uniformity, sameness, and behavior. In the final pages of *The Human Condition*, Arendt provides a frightening description of this state:

> The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, "tranquilized," functional type of behaviour...[I]t is quite possible that the modern age - which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity - may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known. [HC 322]

We can now see the danger of "the social," namely, that unlike the private, public, and intimate realms, it is endowed with the remarkable capacity to "grow" and "devour," with respect not only to activities of the *vita activa* but also to their worldly locations: "Since the rise of the social, since the admission of household and housekeeping activities to the public realm, an irresistible tendency to grow, to devour the older realms of the political and privacy as well as the more recently established sphere of intimacy, has been one of the outstanding characteristics of the new realm" [HC 45].

It is important to note that many of the characteristics of "the social" result from its correspondence to one single human condition: "life itself". As a consequence, "the social" threatens the highest activity within the *vita activa*, and the highest "condition under which life on earth has been given to man" [HC 7], namely, the human condition of plurality. In place of the human condition of plurality we find only sameness: "The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective" [HC 58]; moreover, "the monolithic character of every type of society, its conformism which allows for only one interest and one opinion, is ultimately rooted in the one-ness of man-kind" [HC 46]. Because "human existence is conditioned existence" [HC 9], we can see that "the social" threatens to eradicate the very foundation or ground of human existence itself, to eradicate the condition of the highest human activity. "The social" is the most profound and unprecedented threat to the human condition of plurality and therefore to human existence itself. In "the social", resentment against the human condition and "rebellion

against human existence as it has been given" [HC 2] reaches its most dramatic proportions. Indeed, resentment and the loss of plurality are associated with the loss of our very ability to think: "thoughtlessness...seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time" [HC 5]. We shall see in Chapter Three how thoughtlessness, resentment, and the loss of plurality are related.

ii) Critics of "the social"

Having considered both how *The Human Condition* culminates in an account of the modern rise of "the social" and Arendt's description of the reversal of the hierarchy within the *vita activa* (and a resulting preoccupation with the human condition of life), we shall pause briefly to consider how Arendt's concept of "the social" is treated in the scholarly literature. Very few readings of *The Human Condition* consider "the social" in positive terms, and those who construe it as such -- for example, Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves, who states that "the category of the social plays a crucial role in Arendt's assessment of modernity,"[18] and that "the social constitutes a novel form of living together"[19] -- consider it only briefly. In *Politics, Conscience, Evil*, George Kateb speaks of "modernity's greatness"[20] and rejects Arendt's description outright, criticizing her for being "inhospitable to modernity."[21]

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18 Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 60.

19 D'Entreves, page 47.

20 George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (New Jersey: Rowmman & Allenhald, 1984), 169.

Perhaps the most helpful general text on all of Arendt's work is Margaret Canovan's *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought.* Canovan asserts that "Arendt's use of the term 'society' and her accompanying distinction between 'the social' and 'the political' are notoriously hard to grasp."[22] Canovan provides an explanation for why Arendt chose to use "the social", stating that "the notion of 'society' is often used as...a catch-all concept that appears to include everything...But this is emphatically not the sense in which Arendt used the word. When she talks about 'society' she does not mean the sum total of human relations, but rather a particular mode of relations that has special features and is characteristic of particular places and times."[23] Following her brief discussion of "the social", Canovan goes on to state that "what is lacking in this view of society is of course any appreciation of ...the opportunities for personal freedom offered by the rise of a market economy."[24] However, as we will see it was precisely Arendt's intention to reveal how a market economy is at odds with plurality, and represents a preoccupation with the human condition of life.

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21 Kateb, page 169.

22 Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 116.

23 Canovan, page 117.

24 Canovan, page 121.

Kimberly Curtis acknowledges the centrality and validity of "the social", stating that "the rise of the social realm represents a terrible kind of deformation"[25] and that, as a result, "extinguishing the human condition of plurality...became a goal of politics."[26] Curtis' work centres on "the real", by which she means our experience of Arendt's "public space of appearance."[27] She goes on to emphasize our "responsiveness to others", which she links with "aesthetic sensibility."[28] Both this "sensibility" and this "responsiveness", in her view, are threatened by modern "oblivion,"[29] by which she means "the social". However, Curtis limits her critique to only one element of "the social": its effect on our experience of the Other.

In the only scholarly attempt to date to place "the social" at the center of Arendt's work, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's concept of the social*, Hannah Fenichel Pitkin agrees that "the social" is crucial to *The Human Condition*; moreover, she agrees that Arendt "intended that concept to address a real problem she saw in the actual world of politics and history in which we all live, a problem she regarded as of the utmost urgency and importance."[30] Pitkin goes on to state that "if she was right

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25 Kimberly Curtis, *Our sense of the real: aesthetic experience and Arendtian politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 81.

26 Curtis, page 6.

27 Curtis, page 14.

28 Curtis, page 10.

29 Curtis, page 12.

30 Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's concept of the social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 6.

about that - and I am inclined to think she was - then the ultimate point of studying the social surely lies in thinking more clearly and realistically about that problem."[31] Pitkin further agrees that "perhaps there is even something about the enterprise of political theory as such at stake. That would certainly give the investigation of Arendt's concept of the social an importance extending well beyond the technicalities of Arendt scholarship."[32]

However, the agreement stops here. Pitkin's work is perhaps the most aggressive, unfounded, and polemical work on Arendt. Indeed, the title itself, *The Attack of the Blob*, trivializes Arendt's account of modernity. Pitkin states that Arendt's account of "the social" is "like a science-fiction fantasy: Arendt writes about the social as if [it were] an evil monster from outer space,"[33] and identifies "this monster's proper name" as "the social."[34] Pitkin explains that the title of her own work comes from "the rash of kitsch science-fiction films popular in the 1950's, the period in which Arendt wrote *The Human Condition.*"[35] In my view, however, to suggest that Arendt was motivated by American popular culture is absurd.

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31 Pitkin, page 6.

32 Pitkin, page 6.

33 Pitkin, page 4.

34 Pitkin, page 3.

35 Pitkin, page 4.

As we have seen, "the social" is characterized by a capacity to exclude political action and, moreover, seems to possess an autonomous agency, an inherent ability to "grow" and "devour". Arendt's characterization of "the social" led Pitkin to assert that the concept not only was "significantly counterproductive",[36] but was also "confused", "contradictory", and "meaningless"; moreover, it was a "mistake."[37] Regarding Pitkin's own motive, she states that "what first engaged my curiosity about the social was that Arendt employs the concept in such an obviously counterproductive way, undermining her own central teachings."[38] Pitkin presents her own position and intention as follows:

> This book traces the career of one problematic concept in the thought of one major political theorist of our time. The concept merits attention not because the theorist got it right and used it to teach an important truth, but quite the contrary, because the concept was confused and her way of deploying it radically at odds with her most central and valuable teaching. If studying it is nevertheless worthwhile, that is because its significance transcends the technicalities of textual interpretation and the critique of a particular thinker's work. If the concept was a mistake, that mistake was not just idiosyncratic or careless, and the problem that the concept was intended to address remains problematic. The thinker is Hannah Arendt, arguably the greatest and most original political theorist of the mid-twentieth century; the concept is what she called "the social".[39]

Contrary to what we observed (in section II, i), Pitkin insists that "one looks in vain for a definition of these expressions [i.e., "the social realm", "the social sphere",

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36 Pitkin, page 18.

37 Pitkin, page 1.

38 Pitkin, page 3.

39 Pitkin, page 1.

and "the social"], for Arendt never defines her terms."[40] Pitkin later asks, "why did Arendt develop imagery [of 'the social'] so flagrantly at odds with what she most wanted to say?"[41]

Pitkin is also critical of Arendt for even developing the term "the social", condemning "Arendt's puzzling hypostasization of the adjective "society" into a noun."[42] Pitkin's criticism of this "hypostasization" is based solely on her insistence that Arendt "does nothing comparable with what she regards as the contrasting adjective, 'political.'"[43] However, in fairness to Arendt, she does have several comparable "hypostasizations" with respect to this adjective, including "the *polis*", "the public realm", and "the realm of human affairs."

Pitkin further insists that Arendt fails to relate "the social" to her account either of labor or of work, stating that "the concept of the social is conspicuously absent from the chapters where labor and work are discussed, and neither labor nor work is mentioned much where the social appears."[44] While this may be true in part, I have shown above how "the social" is intimately connected with the liberation of the human condition of life and the elevation of labor, to the point where everything is considered to be performed in the manner of labor. Furthermore, while Pitkin is critical of Arendt

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40 Pitkin, page 11.

41 Pitkin, page 226.

42 Pitkin, page 3.

43 Pitkin, page 3.

44 Pitkin, page 177-178.

for not explaining her terms, she goes on to criticize Arendt for connecting labor and behavior, raising the question: "if labor and behaviour are the same, why does Arendt introduce the latter term at all? Why not just continue using "labor" throughout?"[45] Pitkin then proceeds to conflate behaviour with action, stating that "people behave as they act 'with respect to *each other*,' not with respect to material objects or substances."[46] But this is precisely Arendt's point - to connect both activities and conditions with particular types of human relations.

Although Pitkin maintains that "this book is no psychohistory,"[47] she undermines her own stance by her speculations concerning Arendt's own psychological influences, particularly those of her mother, her father, and her husband, Heinrich Blucher. Pitkin describes "the social" as a "regression fantasy, a fearful vision of... the 'bad mother' of infantile experience."[48] Regarding Arendt's father, Pitkin states that "having grown up 'fatherless' (from the age of seven if not from the age of two), Arendt was left chronically hungry for an (idealized) father but also focused on her one remaining parent, who seems herself to have been deeply ambivalent about the proper role for a woman."[49] Pitkin's most absurd statements, in my view, concern her reading

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45 Pitkin, page 178.

46 Pitkin, page 178. Pitkin's emphasis.

47 Pitkin, page 18.

48 Pitkin, page 230.

49 Pitkin, page 149.

of Arendt's account of *animal laborans* as "indeed feminine",[50] and "the social" as a "bad mother", a "vision of matriarchal tyranny."[51] Pitkin insists that "the social" as "maternal" "is not, to be sure, a nurturing, protective, gentle mother...but an evil, dominating, destructive matriarch constantly seeking to expand her power, to control and infantilize her children, to render them docile and make them behave, until she finally extinguishes their independence altogether, destroying all boundaries and merging the 'children' back into a single mass - herself."[52] Apparently, Arendt's account of "the social" was based entirely on her own relationship with her mother.[53] Pitkin then asserts that work is masculine, insofar as "*homo faber* is characterized not by helpless entrapment in process but by technical mastery and efficiency, a narrowly focused instrumentalism."[54]

However, Pitkin's assumptions misrepresent several crucial elements of "the social". First, Arendt did not associate her activities with any existing group; they correspond to human conditions and ways of experiencing the world, not to specific persons. Furthermore, even if we accept Pitkin's insistence that they do correspond to persons, we notice that her reading of Arendt could easily be reversed. For example, Pitkin herself acknowledges that "the social" is characterized by a relentless capacity to

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50 Pitkin, page 166.

51 Pitkin, page 171.

52 Pitkin, page 171.

53 Pitkin, page 171.

54 Pitkin, page 167.

grow, devour, conquer, impose, and control,[55] characteristics that she attributes to *homo faber*. Furthermore, as we observed in our earlier outline of the rise of "the social", *The Human Condition* concludes with the defeat of *homo faber* and "the victory of *animal laborans*" [HC vi]. Moreover, "what needs explanation is not the modern esteem of *homo faber*, but the fact that this esteem of *homo faber* was so quickly followed by the elevation of labor to the highest position in the hierarchical order of the *vita activa*" [HC 306]. On Pitkin's terms, this would suggest that modernity is characterized by a defeat of the masculine by the feminine, a conclusion Pitkin would hardly agree with. Lastly, whereas Pitkin insists that labor is feminine, insofar as laboring is "associated with giving birth,"[56]Arendt argues just the opposite, stating that a central component of action, indeed its "ontological root", is birth: "action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality" [HC 9].

Finally, Pitkin develops four attempts to respond to "the social": the "institutional path" of organizational structures; the "characteriological path" of personal conduct; the "ideational path" of "thoughts, ideas, and conceptual frameworks;" and the "Just do it" of political action.[57] Her third, "ideational" attempt is Pitkin's only treatment of thought. However, Pitkin overemphasizes the similarity between thinking and judging (which latter topic was to be Arendt's third and final

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55 Pitkin, page 4, where Pitkin lists the various attributes Arendt associates with "the social."

56 Pitkin, page 166.

57 Pitkin, page 253-284.

volume of *Life of the Mind*), insofar as Pitkin describes thinking as an ability to "put oneself in another's shoes".[58] As we shall see in our Chapter Four, this description falls short of capturing what Arendt meant by the faculty of thought.

At this point, Pitkin claims that her "account of Arendt's concept of the social...is completed, but that, in a sense, the most significant work only begins here. If the problem she intended her concept to address is real and anywhere near as important and urgent as she thought, we desperately need better ways of thinking about it and dealing with it. That surely is the real point, the job that needs doing. Unfortunately, it is not a job I can do."[59] Nor is it a job that this writer can do within the scope of a thesis. However, in Chapter Four, we shall discuss the extent to which Arendt herself made this attempt.

We have now completed our consideration of the only sustained examination of "the social" in the secondary literature. As we noted earlier, many Arendt scholars make the error of equating Arendt's account of activities with more modern theories of social classes and categories. Margaret Canovan, for example, explores the apparent contradictions in *The Human Condition,* arguing that a tension exists between Arendt's "democratic and elitist aspects."[60] For Canovan, Arendt is at once "one of the most

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58 Pitkin, page 270.

59 Pitkin, page 251.

60 Margaret Canovan, "The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought," *Political Theory* 6 (February 1978) : 5.

radical of democrats",[61] and yet an "elitist of almost Nietzschean intensity," someone who "expresses contempt not only for the activity of laboring, but for the characteristic tastes and dispositions of laborers."[62] George Kateb agrees, insisting that when Arendt speaks of labor and the life process she "has the laboring mass in mind, the *animal laborans* in enormous number."[63]

In contrast to such critiques concerning Arendt's apparent disdain for democracy and equality, Wayne F. Allen condemns "a 'compulsive egalitarianism', which minimizes personal achievement and makes any form of excellence suspect,"[64] and goes on to celebrate the "elitist strain which runs through [Arendt's] work,"[65] her apparent "elite theory of action,"[66] and seeks to "demonstrate how Arendt's elitism flows from her radical democracy to give new meaning to political action."[67]

Contrary to such accusations from her critics, Arendt, in *The Human Condition,* states that activities are "within the range of every human being." [HC 5] More to the point, to identify Arendt's activities with a particular social group is to misrepresent

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61 Canovan, page 5.

62 Canovan, page 6.

63 George Kateb, "Freedom and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt" *Political Theory* 5 (1977): 144.

64 Wayne F. Allen, "*Homo Aristocus:* Hannah Arendt's Elites," *The Idealist*, 13 (June 1983): 226.

65 Allen, page 233.

66 Allen, page 232.

67 Allen, page 226.

Arendt's intention. Shortly after Kateb's and Canovan's articles were published in *Political Theory,* Martin Levin wrote: "I believe both Kateb and Canovan are wrong in discerning elitist tendencies in Arendt."[68] Levin insists that these two critics "too easily assume that Arendt's devaluation of labor and her indictment of *animal laborans* refer to a social category of humanity."[69] He goes on to state that what they argue for is an "indictment of an activity, a way of life, even a relationship to the world."[70] However, Levin neglects to consider that activities also refer to conditions and that, consequently, "the social" poses a threat to the human condition of plurality. Arendt's activities correspond to underlying human conditions, to ways of relating to the world, and to a preoccupation with freedom or necessity, to public or private concerns. Arendt is preoccupied with the admission of certain activities and their corresponding conditions into the public realm, and with the resulting exclusion of other activities and conditions. In Arendt's words, the difference is "not between the men, [but] between the activities."[71]

Having observed that *The Human Condition* culminates in "the social", and having considered the cursory treatment of this concept in the literature, I shall examine, in the following chapter, several possible ways in which Arendt, both in *The*

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68 Martin Levin, "On *Animal Laborans* and *Homo Politicus,*" *Political Theory* 7/4 (November 1979): 521.

69 Levin, page 521.

70 Levin, page 523.

71 Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt" in Melvyn. A. Hill, ed. *Hannah Arendt: Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979): 328.

Human Condition and *On Revolution,* responds to "the social" and moves toward a renewed sense of political life.

CHAPTER THREE: ARENDT'S RESPONSE TO "THE SOCIAL "— ACTION AND REVOLUTION

I) Action

i) Action as redemption of work and labor

We have discussed Arendt's accounts of the ascent of "the social," of the reversal of the hierarchy within the *vita activa*, and of the human condition of life. We will now consider the extent to which she responds to "the social" in *The Human Condition* and in *On Revolution.* Arendt considers modernity as "the social": first, in that "the social" identifies action with work and both action and work with labor; and second, in that all activities are undertaken in the interest of the life-process. She writes: "we have almost succeeded in leveling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance" [HC 126]. Arendt insists that this appropriation of "human activities" can be reversed by certain qualities of "another and possibly higher faculty" [HC 236] which may "redeem" those activities beneath them.

We will take our cue from Arendt's statement that "the *animal laborans* could be redeemed" through *homo faber*, who "erects a world of durability," and that *homo faber*, in turn, could be redeemed through "action and speech" [HC 236]. Redemption for each of these higher activities comes, in turn, from "outside of each of the respective activities" [HC 236]. However, in the case of *animal laborans* this refers not only to the tools and instruments that *homo faber* develops to ease the toil of labor.

Rather, it is the fabrication of a lasting world that reverses the subjection of *animal laborans* both to the endless cycle of consumption and production and to the privative preoccupation with the life process: "*Homo faber*, the toolmaker, invented tools and implements in order to erect a world, not - at least, not primarily - to help the human life process" [HC 151]. The worldlessness of *animal laborans*, that is to say, his state of worldly alienation, is redeemed by the worldliness of *homo faber*. Arendt alludes to this redemption in the final pages of her chapter on labor, where she states that, in order for *animal laborans* to survive, he must see nature as the "great provider of all 'good things'" [HC 134]. This entails "taking things out of nature's hands and consuming them" [HC 135]. Moreover, she asserts that "without being at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use and for erecting a world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human" [HC 135]. In short, the danger of modern life is that we may lose our awareness both of the influence of necessity and of our own preoccupation with the life process, such that we "would no longer be able to recognize ["the social's] own futility" [HC 135] and would thereby lose our opportunity for redemption. This preoccupation culminates in the situation in which humans "behave" and become uniform, both of which Arendt associates with "the social."

Although the worldliness of *homo faber* may redeem *animal laborans*, work, in turn, stands in need of redemption from its "predicament of meaninglessness" [HC 236]. The predicament of *homo faber* is caused by his tendency to "instrumentalize" nature, to view a tree as merely wood, as material to be worked upon and drawn into

human artifice. Once all things have been reduced in this way to mere objects, they become subjected to the instrumental character of utilitarian calculation. However, Arendt asserts, "the perplexity of utilitarianism is that it gets caught in the unending chain of means and ends without ever arriving at some principle which could justify the category of means and end, that is, of utility itself" [HC154]. She further asserts that the utilitarianism and instrumentality of *homo faber* inevitably leads to the "loss of all standards" and the "limitless devaluation of everything given" [HC 157].

In addition to the predicament of meaninglessness that is associated with utilitarianism and instrumentality, *homo faber* stands in need of redemption from some of the problematic qualities of work itself. Insofar as *homo faber* is able to establish an exchange market for his goods, he is not as isolated as *animal laborans*. However, in this market *homo faber* encounters others as those who "did not meet as persons but as owners of commodities and exchange values" [HC 162]. Further, work entails a risk, namely, that the appeal of its "greater reliability" [HC 195] may result in a tendency to apply this concept to the realm of politics itself, that is to say, to conceive of politics in terms of making. Thus, applying to the political realm the model of the relationship that holds between a craftsman and his material is profoundly dangerous, insofar as doing so inevitably results in attempts to "make history." Furthermore, Arendt continues, modernity is characterized by a growing tendency to conflate work and labor, such that "work is now performed in the mode of laboring" [HC 230]. Such negative aspects of work culminate in *homo faber's* predicament of "earthly alienation," not to mention other negative aspects of "the social."

According to Arendt, such a state can be redeemed "only through the interrelated faculties of action and speech" [HC 236], through which a political actor can disclose himself and establish a space of appearance that assures him a sense of reality and meaning in what otherwise would be a meaningless cosmos, that encourages his innate capacity to bring something unprecedented and unexpected into the world, and that enables him to attain a kind of historical immortality through the organized remembrance of the *polis*.

ii) The potentialities of action

However, the *bios politikos* is itself not free of peril, for it is constrained both by irreversibility and unpredictability which, by provoking processes that are unknowable and impossible to anticipate, threaten the order and stability of the human world. For Arendt, it is in relation to this predicament that philosophers have sought to escape the realm of human affairs, positing instead a realm of eternal standards upon which a *polis* can be founded. Modern ideologies have secularized these standards, and attempted to "make" history in much the same way that *homo faber* fabricates a table. However, unlike the predicament posed by labor and work, both of which are redeemed through "another and possibly higher faculty," action is redeemed through the "potentialities of action itself" [HC 236]. Here, Arendt offers a remedy for the predicament of irreversibility, recommending that humans develop both "the faculty of forgiving" and "the faculty to make and keep promises" [HC 237].

The "faculty of forgiving" sets up "islands of security" in the uncertain future, while revenge, its opposite, binds man in an "automatic reaction to transgression" [HC 241]. Forgiveness, like action, is unexpected and unpredictable but "acts anew," thereby "freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven." [HC 241] Forgiving achieves this insofar as it favors the "who" that has acted over the "what" of the deed: "...what was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it" [HC 241]. Concerning unpredictability, Arendt proposes that "the faculty to make and keep promises" establishes stability through establishing contracts, treatises, and agreements. In the face of both the "basic unreliability of men" and the "impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act," such promises can establish "islands of predictability" and "guideposts of reliability" [HC 244].

Although the human faculties of forgiveness and of making and keeping promises can redeem action from its characteristic predicaments of irreversibility and unpredictability, these faculties are also specific to action's own redemption. Forgiveness and promises, after all, cannot reverse the modern tendency to conceive both action and work as labor, cannot reverse the modern preoccupation with necessity and with the "public organization of the life process" [HC 146], and cannot reverse the tendency both to "behave" and to conform to the sameness of the *oikos*. Hence, these two potentialities, forgiveness and promises, are both unable to respond to "the social."

iii) The ontological roots of action

We have considered some possible "remedies" for the predicaments of each activity, namely, two "potentialities" that might enable action to redeem itself from its own predicaments. We have also acknowledged the inadequacies of each to "redeem" modernity from "the social." However, there is yet another component or capacity of action, one that may serve to address certain problems associated with the rule of "the social." According to Arendt, this capacity, an ability that all newcomers to the world possess, we inherit simply by virtue of having been born. It is this "fact of natality" [HC 247] that offers a possibility, insofar as action itself is "ontologically rooted" in it [HC 247]. Natality, in her view, is the ability to initiate and set into motion something with "startling unexpectedness" [HC 246], something that could not have been anticipated, could not have been initiated were each human being not original and unique. This "new beginning inherent in birth" [HC 9] is the human capacity to interrupt "the inexorable automatic course of daily life" [HC 246]. Arendt considers this capacity to be the "most general condition of human existence," a condition with which "all three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected" [HC 8]. Hence, action is the "actualization of the human condition of natality" [HC 178]. Indeed, she asserts that natality "may be the central category of political thought" [HC 9]. Although this faculty of natality "looks like a miracle" [HC 247] to those bound to the "automatic processes" of "the social," natality itself demands redemption. Recalling Arendt's attempts to rescue action from its characteristic predicaments, we

realize that it is those very elements of "unpredictability" and "irreversibility", which natality causes, that destabilize the realm of human affairs. One of her main remedies for righting this instability was located in the human capacity to make promises. Natality, therefore, is unable to respond to "the social."

iv) Action: discourse and disclosure

In *The Human Condition,* Arendt often makes note of the importance of speech. For example, she warns us in the prologue that while "speech is what makes man a political being" [HC 3], we are threatened by pursuing "a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful" [HC 4]. Arendt further observes that, increasingly, we "move in a world where speech has lost its power" [HC 4]. Arendt likens speech to action, considering them to be "of the same rank and the same kind" [HC 26]. She further maintains that "finding the right words at the right moment...is action" [HC 26]. She also contrasts action with contemplation, whose "content cannot be rendered in speech" [HC 27]. Speech and narratives, for Arendt, are the ways in which the actor discloses his identity and inserts himself into the realm of human affairs. They thus enable the political actor to immortalize his actions through saving them from obscurity and forgetfulness.

For Arendt, speech corresponds to the uniqueness and distinctness of each human. This impulse to speak and thereby insert oneself into the human world has its origin in the aforementioned "fact of natality," for "its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by

beginning something new on our own initiative" [HC 177]. Moreover, action itself depends on speech, as "speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor" [HC 178]. Although *animal laborans* and *homo faber* each possess the capacity to speak, their speech is merely a "means of communicating information" [HC 179] and does not reveal unique personal identities nor entail the "disclosure of who." However, "action without a name, a 'who' attached to it, is meaningless" [HC 180].

For Arendt, the representatives of this faculty of telling stories are Homer, who "immortalized" the Trojan War and the great deeds of its hero, Achilles, and Thucydides, whose Funeral Oration in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* memorializes the great speeches of Pericles. However, the importance of speech also lies in its performative dimension, namely, that words and self-disclosure contain a theatricality which confirms the interrelatedness of humans as "actors." The re-enacting of stories on a stage entails a revealing through the *mimesis* of acting. Indeed, for Arendt, "the theater is the political art par excellence" [HC 188].

Although speech and action are closely interrelated, such that deeds need speech in order to be immortalized, speech, in turn, requires deeds of which it can speak. Yet, for Arendt, speech cannot of itself provoke deeds, for to view speech in this manner would imply intentionality and predictability, two features that she critiques with respect to *homo faber's* attempt to master the unpredictability of action. In short, stories can only be told once events have happened. Thus, to try to predict the outcome of a story in advance, or to try to control events through speech would be akin to

controlling action. For Arendt, the author of a story is not its "producer," for "nobody is the author or producer of his own life story" [HC 184]. The actor who began the story is "its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer" [HC 184]. It is such predictability that perpetuates the very "behavior" and automatism that culminates in the uniformity of "the social." Without deeds, speech is condemned to the futility of forgetfulness and to the meaningless of the life process. Furthermore, this attempt to master action via speech has ultimately led to the modern notion, found both in Hegel and Marx, that creating a theory of history allows us to master action within it. For Arendt, such an assumption lies behind much of the horror of modernity.

II) Revolutions

We noted earlier the importance that Arendt attaches to the human capacity to begin, insofar as she grounds natality in the human condition itself. We shall next turn to the subject of revolutions, which is the shape that political action takes in modernity, and to the movement through which political action may be recovered. That Arendt can speak so highly of this modern political phenomenon suggests, notwithstanding the accusations of her critics, that she is not being merely "nostalgic" for an irretrievably lost golden age.[72] Whereas natality is one of the human conditions and has therefore always numbered among the capabilities of men, modern revolutions, in contrast, closely parallel the rise of "the social." Since the subject of revolutions was considered

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72 See for example: Noel O'Sullivan, "Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society," in *Contemporary Political Philosophers*, edited by de Crespigny and Minogue (New York: Dodds, Mead, 1975): 228-251.

only marginally in *The Human Condition*, we shall seek enlightenment concerning this political phenomenon by turning to another of Arendt's works, *On Revolution* [OR], which was published five years after *The Human Condition.* Here, Arendt insists that revolutions are "not mere changes" [OR 21] in existing orders but, rather, are unprecedented and unpredictable breaks with the past--an establishment of something new that could not have been anticipated. Revolutions, in her view, bear striking similarities to the public sphere, insofar as they are generated by the spontaneous efforts of political actors who engage in self-disclosure with their peers, and who are bound neither to the repetitiveness of *animal laborans* nor to the utilitarianism and instrumentality of *homo faber.* We now will consider Arendt's comments concerning certain specific revolutions.

i) The French Revolution

In *On Revolution,* Arendt contrasts two types of revolutions, both of which reveal not only the promises but also the dangers inherent in political action. In a chapter entitled "The Social Question," she expresses disdain towards the French Revolution on the grounds that it was driven by "the needs of the body" [OR 59] and thus, both by the human condition of "life itself" and by "the social". As a result, when the revolutionaries "appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them...freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself" [OR 60]. Arendt also argues that the French Revolution was further derailed by the human emotion of compassion, which the revolutionaries had learned from

Rousseau. In Arendt's view, compassion is an inherently private and unpolitical phenomenon: "Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence" [OR 86]. As George Kateb observes, the French Revolution "is seen by Arendt as eloquent vindication of the contention that a politicized love of humanity sponsors appalling ruin in political life."[73] For Arendt, when any political movement is driven by concerns for "the social", it not only is condemned to failure but will also lead, inevitably, to violence and the loss of freedom. Indeed, according to Arendt, it was such concerns "that unleashed the Terror and sent the Revolution to its doom" [OR 60].

The example of the French Revolution and its aftermath demonstrates the dangers of political movements that are driven by private concerns. However, we must not be too hasty in dismissing some of the possibilities that revolutions offer. In the second example she considers, the American Revolution, Arendt insists that such kinds of private concerns were absent, owing in part to the relative "abundance" of the New World. However, she argues, what most significantly differentiated the two revolutions was to be found in attitudes towards politics itself.

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[73] George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (New Jersey: Rowman & Allenhald, 1984), 91.

ii) The American Revolution

Arendt speaks of the joy the Founding Fathers experienced, stating that "the Americans knew that public freedom consisted in having a share in public business, and that the activities connected with this business by no means constituted a burden but gave those who discharged them in public a feeling of happiness they could acquire nowhere else" [OR 119]. So great were the joys of discourse and legislation, she maintains, that the Founders considered them "a foretaste of an eternal bliss to come" [OR 131]. As Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves argues, in Arendt's view, "the Founding Fathers, although they might have pretended that they longed for private life and engaged in politics only out of a sense of duty, made clear in their letters and recollections that they had discovered unexpected delights in action and had acquired a taste for public freedom and for earning distinction among their peers."[74] This joy of political action is akin to the previously cited qualities of the public sphere and thus is based, more deeply, on political motives.

However, the American Revolution was not entirely free of private concerns; and its slogan, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," suggests that "the social question interfered with the course of the American no less sharply, though far less dramatically, than it did with the course of the French Revolution" [OR 137]. Although the American Revolution did not succumb to the influence of "the social" as significantly as did the French Revolution, "the outcome of the American Revolution,

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74 Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves, *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 69.

as distinct from the purposes which started it, has always been ambiguous, and the question of whether the end of government was to be prosperity or freedom has never been settled" [OR 136]. Indeed, Arendt goes so far as to say that "economic growth may one day turn out to be a curse rather than a good" [OR 217].

iii) 20th century revolutions

We next turn to the twentieth century and to its experiments with various political movements, particularly the French Resistance and Hungarian Uprising. After fleeing Germany in 1933, Arendt lived for over a decade in Paris, experiencing the French Resistance first hand. She comments on it only briefly in *On Revolution* and in the preface to *Between Past and Future*, where she describes the Resistance as a movement freer from "the social question" than any previous revolution. However, referring to the Resistance poet, Rene Char, she observes that "there would be not only the welcome liberation from German occupation but liberation from the 'burden' of public business as well. Back they would have to go to the *epaisseur tristei* of their private lives and pursuits" [OR 280]. Arendt laments the passing both of this "lost treasure" and of "the joys of appearing in word and deed without equivocation and without self-reflection" [OR 281], an ephemeral public sphere which fell neither to Terror nor to violence but, rather, faded into privacy.

Arendt spoke in favorable terms of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, which occurred while she was writing *The Human Condition.* She commented briefly on it in *On Revolution*, stating that that uprising was "a true event whose stature will not

depend upon victory or defeat" [OR 144]. For Arendt, the uprising demonstrated that revolutionary action had not faded from the modern world. However, the Hungarian Uprising soon fell to invading Soviet tanks, as well as to the restoration of totalitarian terror.

Although such revolutions constitute a modern form of political action, their fate was to fall prey to totalitarianism, to Terror or, simply, to "private lives and pursuits." Furthermore, the intimate link between revolution and violence implies that revolutions are bound inextricably to tragedy. Although these revolutions occurred in a wide variety of contexts and fell prey to different forces, Arendt does not hold that revolutions can alter the reversal of public and private realms or can overcome the elevation of *animal laborans*: "No revolution ever solved the 'social question'" [OR 112]. Further, her understanding of the relationship between speech and action implies that to call for a revolution would be attempting to "master" history. At the very least, it would mean engaging in politics in the manner of pragmatic prescription.

Our brief consideration of these two texts in search of an adequate response to "the social" has led us to conclude that such a response is to be found neither in *The Human Condition* nor in *On Revolution*. However, in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt plumbs even more deeply the ontological and phenomenological questions she first explored as a student, questions that had to be temporarily set aside because of the pressing urgencies of her experiences with war. She was able, gradually, to return to philosophy, a decision that had been deeply influenced by her political experiences and observations. As Hans Jonas states of Arendt's latter years, "now was the time…to

tackle at last those ultimate themes which in the remote days of our common youth were dimly in our minds."[75] These "ultimate themes" culminated in *The Life of the Mind,* published in 1973, the first volume of which was concerned with the faculty of thinking. We will next examine this inner faculty, to which Arendt alludes in *The Human Condition*, in order to see the extent to which it may be considered a response to "the social."

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[75] Hans Jonas, "Acting, Knowing, Thinking: Gleanings from Hannah Arendt's Philosophical Work," *Social Research* 44 (1977): 28.

CHAPTER FOUR: RE-THINKING "THE SOCIAL"— THOUGHT AND PLURALITY

I) Thought

i) *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind,* Volume I*: Thinking*

Scholars have argued that *Thinking* emerged out of another of Arendt's works, *The Origins of Totalitarianism,*[76] in which she undertook a historical and sociological analysis of an extreme form of modern political evil. Margaret Canovan, for example, argues that *The Life of the Mind* is an attempt to explain the "radical evil" of totalitarianism. She also maintains that "in order to understand *The Human Condition* we need to look at the body of thought that links it to *The Origins of Totalitarianism.*"[77] Canovan later asserts that "the reason why we have spent so long tracing her path from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *The Human Condition* is that only within that context can one properly understand her later book."[78]

Other scholars have argued that *The Life of the Mind* grew out of Arendt's experiences observing Adolph Eichmann. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, for example, states that Arendt's interest in thoughtlessness came about "after she attended the trial of

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76 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Hardcourt Brace & Company, 1976).

77 Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 13.

78 Canovan, page 99.

Adolph Eichmann,"[79] while Kimberly Curtis argues that "the experiences that led Arendt to reflect on the *vita contemplativa* occurred during the trial of Adolf Eichmann."[80] In Arendt's controversial work on Eichmann's trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem,*[81] she coined the now well-known phrase, "the banality of evil," describing the "thoughtlessness" of Eichmann's adherence to the party line and his administrative duties. Given the nature of his monstrous deeds, she was struck by his ordinariness and commonness, by "the manifest shallowness of the doer" [LOM 4]. Arendt herself would seem to support the claim that *The Life of the Mind* grew out of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, for she states that "its immediate impulse came from my attending the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem" [LOM 3]. However, she noted yet another impetus, one typically overlooked by Arendt scholars, an impetus that arose prior to her writing of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and that came from "certain doubts that had been plaguing me ever since I had finished a study of what my publisher wisely called 'The Human Condition'" [LOM 6]. Although the term "thoughtlessness" appeared first in *The Human Condition* [HC 5], that work contained no sustained discussion of thought.

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79 Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, "Reflections on *The Life of the Mind,"* in Hinchman, Lewis P. & Sandra K., eds. *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 336. See also "Thinking and Moral Considerations: Socrates and Arendt's Eichmann" in the same volume.

80 Kimberly Curtis, *Our sense of the real: aesthetic experience and Arendtian politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 46. Curtis goes on to state that it was thought, not the *vita contemplativa,* that led Arendt to reflect on Eichmann.

81 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Revised edition, 1968).

Nonetheless, one can argue that thought 'frames the work,' insofar as Arendt refers to thought both in the Prologue and in the final paragraph.

In *The Human Condition,* Arendt claims that her project "is nothing less than to *think* what we are doing" [HC 5, italics mine]. She goes on to state, however, that "the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable, the activity of thinking, is left out of these present considerations. Systematically, therefore, the book is limited to a discussion of labor, work, and action, which forms its three central chapters" [HC 5]. Although in the final paragraph she argues that "we omitted [thought] from our reconsideration of the *vita activa*" [HC 324], she adds that thinking would surpass all activities of the *vita activa* in terms of "sheer activity" [HC 324]. Indeed, she closes *The Human Condition* with a paradoxical quotation from Cato: "[N]ever is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself" [HC 324]. In short, although Arendt had earlier emphasized the importance of thinking, it was only several years later, on beginning *The Life of the Mind,* that she systematically addressed this theme. Indeed, it is with the same quote from Cato [LOM vii] that she opens *The Life of the Mind.*

Very little scholarly work has been undertaken to connect these two texts to one another; any connection between Arendt's account of "the social" (in *The Human Condition*) and of "thinking" (in *The Life of the Mind*) remains largely undeveloped. *The Human Condition,* imbued with a dramatic sense of escalating political crisis, is a work of political theory proper, focusing on human activities and their modern reversals within the public realm. *Thinking,* on the other hand, is a more abstract work

of phenomenology and philosophy (although not in Arendt's sense of philosophy), a work that focuses on a specific faculty of the human mind. *Thinking*, moreover, is a work that communicates a sense of crisis concerning the history of significant threats to the faculty of thought.

We will proceed by examining how Arendt distinguishes thought from action, contemplation, cognition and intimacy. We will then consider what motives us to think, and the correspondence between thought and speech. We shall culminate our work in an examination of the parallels she establishes between thought and action, insofar as both are grounded in the human condition of plurality, and are threatened by a dual rebellion: the first, against the soul; the second, "against human existence as it has been given" [HC 2].

ii) Thought vs. action, contemplation, cognition, and intimacy

Although Arendt alludes to the parallel between action and thought by describing thought as an active state, as "sheer activity" [HC 325, LOM 162], it is important that we avoid conflating the two. Whereas action, understood as engagement in the realm of human affairs, takes place in the presence of others before whom we appear in speech and deed, thought requires a withdrawal from the public sphere, a retreat from the space of appearance and toward the invisible world of the mind. Indeed, Arendt tells us, thought "cannot come into being except through a deliberate withdrawal from appearances" [LOM 75]. Because "thinking always deals with absences and removes itself from what is present and close at hand" [LOM 199], it

entails a temporary suspension of appearance. Arendt describes the location of thought in the paradoxical terms of "nowhere" and "yet everywhere" [LOM 200]. To this essentially spatial description, Arendt adds a temporal one: that of the "no-longer" and the "not-yet" [LOM 206], the "gap between past and future" [LOM 202]. Arendt describes this "gap" in relation to Kafka's parable in which a certain 'he' is caught between one antagonist, who pushes from behind, and another, who blocks the road in front of him. One might speculate that the future or the "not-yet" corresponds to volume two of *The Life of the Mind,* entitled *Willing,* whereas the "no-longer" of the past corresponds to Arendt's projected but unwritten third volume, *Judging.*

While action remains in the space of appearances and encounters reality in its immediate presence, the withdrawal of thinking requires various transformative processes, including the "mind's faculty of making present what is absent" [LOM 76]. This making-present, or "re-presenting" [LOM 76], also involves a "de-sensing" [LOM 77], through which thinking "must prepare the particulars given to the senses in such a way that the mind is able to handle them in their absence" [LOM 77]. Furthermore, "thinking always implies remembrance" [LOM 78].

Thought can become victim to both ancient and modern ailments. We will first explore the ancient ailments, whose origins, according to Arendt, are to be found in Plato and Christianity. Arendt insists on distinguishing between "thought" and the *vita contemplativa* throughout both *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind,* contending that "thought and contemplation are not the same" [HC 291]; thinking "is the point where mental activity comes to rest" [LOM 6]. However, many Arendt

scholars have failed to acknowledge this distinction. For example, in an otherwise sound analysis of Arendt, Paul Ricoeur states that "man alone thinks, and thinks what is eternal...eternity is what is lacking to mortals, but to the extent that we think, we think eternity."[82] As we shall see, for Arendt, thinking is not concerned with the eternal.

The withdrawal into the mind that thought entails all too often is confused with the withdrawal from political life into contemplation. The *vita contemplativa* entails a deep-seated hostility towards the "unquiet" [HC 15] of human affairs, turning from the *polis* towards a state of stillness and passive speechlessness: "contemplation is not an activity but a passivity" [LOM 6]. This still and passive speechlessness is contrasted with the active state of thought, the "experience of sheer activity" [LOM 162], which maintains its orientation toward, and active engagement in, the *polis*.

Further, the *vita contemplativa* is based on what Arendt calls a "metaphysical fallacy" [LOM 12], "the old metaphysical dichotomy of (true) being and (mere) appearance" [LOM 23]. Toward this distinction she is deeply hostile, despite her own compulsion to propagate innumerable distinctions throughout her works. Such a "two-world theory" [LOM 23], in Arendt's view, entails a turning away from the space of appearance and toward a "higher rank of reality" [LOM 24], toward contemplating a transcendent realm of pure being, a realm unsullied by the *polis*. For Arendt, this dichotomy is a "logical fallacy" [LOM 25], a "metaphysical delusion" [LOM 110]

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82 Paul Ricoeur, "Action, Story, and History: On Re-reading *The Human Condition,*" *Salmagundi* 60 (Summer 1983) :62.

which "always ended with the violent invectives against mere appearance" [LOM 24]. Drawing from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Arendt insists that "in this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearing coincide*" [LOM 19, Arendt's emphasis]. Further, whereas contemplation of the eternal is based, for Arendt, on a concern with truth, thought is a "quest for meaning" [LOM 62] within the spaces of appearances: "*The need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same*" [LOM 15, Arendt's emphasis].

Turning to thought's modern ailment, Arendt also takes pains to differentiate the withdrawal of thought from its deformation into the narrowness of 'pure reckoning' and 'cognition': "thinking withdraws radically and for its own sake from this world and its evidential nature, whereas science profits from a possible withdrawal for the sake of specific results" [LOM 56]. Once man conceives of an eternal truth beyond the realm of 'mere' appearances, he then turns toward the 'model' of "cognition, whose highest criterion is truth" [LOM 57]. Thus does modern science instrumentalize all worldly things, subjecting them to calculative means-end criteria. We observe the influence of Arendt's former teacher, Martin Heidegger, who states in *The Question Concerning Technology* that "everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further

ordering."[83] As a result, "thinking has become a kind of *techne,* a particular kind of craftsmanship" [LOM 154].

Arendt goes on to rescue thought from its narrow reduction by evoking Kant's concepts of *Vernunft* and *Verstand,* reason and intellect, a distinction that "coincides with a distinction between two altogether different mental activities, thinking and knowing, and two altogether different concerns, meaning and cognition" [LOM 14]. This type of modern mental activity has culminated in the notion of "unlimited progress" and, indeed, "unquestionably the notion of progress was born as the result of the tremendous advances of scientific knowledge" [LOM 55]. However, the withdrawal of thinking must not be confused with what Arendt describes as "the Archimedean wish for a point outside the earth from which to unhinge the world" [HC 262], the hallmark of earthly alienation arising from modern natural science. In short, thinking is not 'cognition.' Nor is it subject to the criterion of 'evidence,' or to the measure of its own 'results'.

Just as we considered Arendt's distinction between "the social" and the inner "sphere of intimacy" (which derives from "the social"), so too must we consider Arendt's distinction between thought and intimacy. This latter distinction parallels the distinction she makes between solitude and loneliness: "I call this existential state in which I keep myself company 'solitude' to distinguish it from 'loneliness,' where I am also alone but now deserted not only by human company but also by the possible

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83 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays* translated by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), page 17.

company of myself. It is only in loneliness that I feel *deprived* of human company" [LOM 74]. Arendt contends that thinking "is a solitary but not a lonely business; solitude is that human situation in which I keep myself company" [LOM 185]. On the other hand, the loneliness of the modern sphere of intimacy comes about when one is not "able to keep [oneself] company" [LOM 185].

iii) Reason's need

Having considered thought in relation to action, contemplation, cognition and intimacy, we can now examine the impetus behind thought itself. In *The Life of the Mind,* Arendt dedicates an entire section to the question, "What makes us think?" Indeed, it is with the following response that she opens this work: "to the question What makes us think? there is ultimately no answer other than what Kant called 'reason's need,' the inner impulse of the faculty to actualize itself in speculation" [LOM 69]. This inner need is not the same as the necessity that compels *animal laborans* to carry out his tasks: it entails a withdrawal from the "space of appearance" to the inner dynamics of the thinking ego. It is this very "urge to think" [LOM 70] that so often has been neglected in the history of philosophy. Arendt continues by asserting that "The whole history of philosophy…is shot through with an intramural warfare between man's common sense…and man's faculty of thought and need of reason, which determine him to remove himself for considerable periods from [the common world]" [LOM 81]. Further, Arendt dramatically links thinking with our very existence, stating that man is "thought made flesh, the…incarnation of the thinking capacity" [LOM 47].

She also contends that "thinking accompanies life and is itself the de-materialized quintessence of being alive" [LOM 191]. Just as in *The Human Condition*, a life without action "is literally dead to the world" [HC 176], so too is "a life without thinking... not fully alive" [LOM 191]. Regarding the modern crisis that gives rise to thought, Arendt states that "thinking arises out of the disintegration of reality and the resulting *dis*-unity of man and world" [LOM 153].

iv) Speech as a link between thought and action: the urge to appear

In one of Arendt's few comments on thought that appear in *The Human Condition*, she states that thought and action "have much more in common that any one of them has with work or labor" [HC 95]. In light of this statement, we will now consider the commonality between thought and speech. Arendt emphasizes, in *The Human Condition*, the link between action and speech: "Action and speech are so closely related because...[s]peechless action would no longer be action" [HC 178]. In *The Life of the Mind*, we see that she also binds speech to thought, maintaining that "thought without speech is inconceivable" [LOM 32] and that "no speechless thought can exist" [LOM 100]. Arendt distinguishes two different ways in which they are bound: first, "silently or sounding out in dialogue" [LOM 99] and, second, "intercourse with ourselves, as well as with others" [LOM 189].

While thought itself is driven by a "need" and an "urge," its relationship with speech entails a reciprocal "urge": *"thinking beings have an urge to speak, speaking beings have an urge to think"* [LOM 99, italics Arendt's]. Regarding self-disclosure,

Arendt describes an "innate impulse," an "urge to self-display" [LOM 29], which she finds in the work of the Swiss zoologist and biologist Adolph Portmann. This "impulse" is the reverse of "reason's need," which we recall is the initial impulse behind the withdrawal from the space of appearance. For Portmann, "everything that is alive...has an *urge to appear*, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its 'inner-self' but itself as an individual" [LOM 29]. This "urge to self-display"... "reaches its climax in the human species" [LOM 30]. However, to appear, thought must be made fit for the world. Hence, it "stands in need of metaphor in order to bridge the gap between a world given to sense experience, and a realm where no such immediate apprehension of evidence can ever exist" [LOM 32].

Metaphors facilitate "the transition from one existential state, that of thinking, to another, that of being an appearance among appearances" [LOM 103]. However, metaphors go only in one direction, for they refer to appearances in order to express the invisible, to make the invisible appear. In short, they are "meant to illuminate an experience that does not appear" [LOM 106]. Metaphors are required in order to show how certain things are alike while not being identical. The differences between thoughts and appearances cannot be resolved any further.

II. Plurality

i. Plurality and rebellion

To provide a contrast to this "urge to appear," an urge that manifests itself in self-disclosure through both metaphors and dialogue with others, we will next turn to

thinking itself, the "silent dialogue" [LOM 187] or "intercourse with ourselves" [LOM 189]. Arendt describes as "inward discourse" [LOM 186] "...the soundless solitary dialogue we call thinking" [LOM 190]. This inward discourse requires that an inner duality exists in which "I am both the one who asks and the one who answers" [LOM 185]. Arendt calls this inner dialogue of both asking and answering the "two-in-one" [LOM 179]: "I am clearly not just one. A difference is inserted into my Oneness" [LOM 183]. Arendt emphasizes that this inner difference is crucial to thought, and draws a parallel between this inner difference and the difference characterizing the space of appearance: "The specifically human actualization of consciousness in the thinking dialogue between me and myself suggests that difference and otherness, which are such outstanding characteristics of the world of appearances as it is given to man for his habitat among a plurality of things, are the very conditions for the existence of man's mental ego as well, for this ego actually exists only in duality" [LOM 187].

However, the duality of thinking is more than that of a simple two-in-one: "its inherent duality points to the infinite plurality which is the law of the earth" [LOM 187], and "nothing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists *essentially* in the plural than that his solitude actualizes his merely being conscious of himself...into a duality during the thinking activity" [LOM 185, italics Arendt's]. This is perhaps the most crucial component of *The Life of the Mind*, insofar as this description of thinking bears a striking resemblance to that of action as found in *The Human Condition*. Both thought and action share a commonality with the human condition of plurality, a "law

of the earth" [LOM 187], which serves to ground a mental faculty in what previously was described as the condition of a political activity.

Jacques Taminaux associates (in my view, mistakenly) the open and unending dialogue of thought with *animal laborans'* cyclical interaction with nature: "Arendt argues as though the life of the *psyche* were strictly the inner counterpart of the metabolism with nature."[84] Such an association seems to suggest that thought corresponds to the human condition of life. Taminaux then insists that "the psychic life of the soul is *per se* impervious to appearances, to plurality, and to past and future,"[85] and that thinking's "peculiar solitude makes it impervious to plurality."[86] However, he overlooks the extent to which Arendt associates the inner dialogue of thought with the human condition of plurality.

We have identified as basic to contemplation a turning away from the *polis* along with a demand that the *polis* serve to make the philosophers' way of life possible. Furthermore, we recall that, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt asserts that this notion grew out of the trial of Socrates [HC 12]. However, Arendt argues that a decisive break occurred between Socrates and Plato, a "sharp dividing line between what is authentically Socratic and the philosophy taught by Plato" [LOM 168]. Whereas she identifies Plato both with contemplation and with hostility towards the

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84 Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker,* translated and edited by Michael Gendre (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 201.

85 Taminiaux, page 202.

86 Taminiaux, page 207.

polis (which purportedly followed his witnessing of the trial and execution of Socrates), she identifies Socrates as a "model, an example of a thinker" [LOM 167], describing him as follows:

> Best suited for this role [of an example of a thinker] would be a man who counted himself neither among the many nor among the few (a distinction at least as old as Pythagoras), who had no aspiration to be a ruler of men, no claim even to be particularly well fitted by his superior wisdom to act in an advisory capacity to those in power, but not a man who submitted meekly to being ruled either; in brief, a thinker who always remained a man among men, who did not shun the marketplace, who was a citizen among citizens, doing nothing, claiming nothing except what in his opinion every citizen should be and have a right to. Such a man ought to be difficult to find: if he were able to represent for us the actual thinking activity, he would not have left a body of doctrine behind; he would not have cared to write down his thoughts even if, after he was through with thinking, there had been any residue tangible enough to set out in black and white. You will have guessed that I am thinking of Socrates [LOM 167-168].

We can now begin to understand more clearly how Arendt understands the political function of thinking, which she describes through three Socratic "similes": a gadfly, a midwife, and an electric eel [LOM 172]. As a 'gadfly', Socrates aroused his fellow Athenians to thinking and examination, without which they would not be fully alive, carrying on undisturbed as if asleep. As a 'midwife', Socrates performed a dual function: aiding others in the delivery of their own thoughts and purging them of the "unexamined pre-judgments that would prevent them from thinking" [LOM 173]. Socrates, however, did not provide them with a truth as a replacement. Finally, insofar as Socrates insisted that he "knows nothing," that he "knows only that he knows not," he was like an 'electric eel', a creature who himself remained un-paralyzed while 'shocking' others into a paralyzed state.

However, we must not let these three similes and the political function of thought obscure the importance of the parallel between inner plurality and political plurality. The very ability to be a gadfly, midwife, or electric eel depended largely on Socrates' own inner plurality, which Arendt describes as a form of inner friendship and conscience. Arendt refers to "two positive Socratic propositions" [LOM 181] that she finds in the *Gorgias*: first, that "it is better to be wronged than to do wrong" [LOM 181, *Gorgias* 474b] and, second, that "it would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me rather than that I, *being one*, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict myself" [LOM 181, *Gorgias* 482c. Italics Arendt's]. Regarding the first proposition, Arendt states that the reason "it is better to be wronged than to do wrong" owes to our inner conscience, before which "we have to appear and give an account of ourselves" [LOM 190]. "Conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home" [LOM 191]. Regarding the second proposition, Arendt insists that "if you want to think, you must see to it that the two who carry on the dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be *friends*" [LOM 187-188, Arendt's emphasis]. One must therefore not be out of harmony with oneself, as inner plurality requires a certain kind of inner relationship. Arendt describes the partners in this inner dialogue of me with myself as follows: "the partner who comes to life when you are alert and alone is the only one from whom you can never get away - except by ceasing to think. It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong, because you

can remain the friend of the sufferer; who would want to be the friend of and have to live together with a murderer?" [LOM 188]

Arendt reinforces the notion that the harmony of friendship is contingent on this inner duality and difference: "but nothing that is identical with itself, truly and absolutely *One*, as A is A, can be either in or out of harmony with itself; you always need at least two tones to produce a harmonious sound" [LOM 183]. Arendt then links this difference with plurality: "wherever there is plurality...there is difference" [LOM 184]. However, this harmonious inner difference, grounded in friendship and conscience, can become a state in which one is "at variance with themselves" [LOM 189], in which ones' "soul is in rebellion against itself" [LOM 189]. Arendt asks "what kind of dialogue can you conduct with yourself when your soul is not in harmony but at war with itself?" [LOM 189]

Thought, as we saw earlier, is an inner plurality that "points to" [LOM 187] the human condition of plurality. We might observe that the state in which one lacks this inner harmony of difference and, therefore, does not think, is a form of 'rebellion'. Here, we are reminded of the Prologue to *The Human Condition,* in which Arendt describes the crisis of modernity as a "rebellion against human existence as it has been given" [HC 2]. Considering that "human existence is conditioned existence" [HC 9], we see that the rebellion against inner plurality parallels a rebellion against human existence itself.

It would seem that we have drifted far from a consideration of Arendt's original concerns regarding the growth of "the social" and the preoccupation with the human

condition of life, as outlined in Chapter One. However, insofar as thinking is grounded in the human condition of plurality, and insofar as thinking can be lost as the result of an inner 'rebellion', we can see that "the social" results from a rebellion against human existence; a rebellion of the soul against itself. Whereas thought is based on plurality and difference, "the social" is characterized by the sameness, conformity, and behaviour of the life process itself. Conversely, we can observe that rebellion against the human condition is a form of rebellion against one's own mind.

Although our earlier observation - that Arendt's approach was based largely on the task of making distinctions - could fuel much future research, investigating such a complex topic is far beyond the scope of the present study. Nonetheless, we can observe that in *The Human Condition,* Arendt explicitly connects the notions of plurality and distinctions, stating that "plurality...has the two-fold character of equality and distinction" [HC 175]. In this regard, we can see that not only is thinking able to respond to "the social", but it also may respond to Arendt's "chief quarrel with the historical and political sciences," namely, "their growing incapacity for making distinctions."[87] Thus we observe that inner difference and inner plurality may indeed correspond to the making of distinctions, a correspondence that, in Arendt's view, may be related to the crisis that informs the discipline of political science.

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87 Eric Voegelin, "Review of Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism",* *Review of Politics* 15 (January 1953), 82.

ii. Judging

We recall that, at the beginning of *The Human Condition,* Arendt stated that the *vita activa* has been historically misrepresented by the *vita contemplative*; that "the term *vita activa* receiv[ed] its meaning from the *vita contemplativa",* [HC 16] and thereby "blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself" [HC 17]. In responding to this development, Arendt undertook to reconsider the *vita activa* from within. With respect to this particular endeavor, Bradshaw argues that *The Human Condition* was a failure, based on Arendt's consideration of thinking in *The Life of the Mind*: which "repudiates the basic assumption of that book: that the *vita activa* can stand on its own, without interference from or judgment by the *vita contemplativa.*"[88] However, we can see that through establishing a common ground between action and thought in the human condition of plurality, Arendt is able to explain political action through its correspondence with the *vita activa.*

Many have stated that *Judging,* the final volume of *The Life of the Mind,* was to provide a 'bridge' or 'missing link' between action and thought. Kimberly Curtis observes that "the final, unfinished volume of *The Life of the Mind, Judging,* was to provide the bridge between the contemplative and active lives."[89] Dana Villa contends that Arendt's "institutionalization of the gap between thinking and acting has driven her more sympathetic critics to her fragmentary and unfinished work on judgment.

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[88] Leah Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 7.

[89] Kimberly Curtis, *Our sense of the real: aesthetic experience and Arendtian politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 48.

Their hope has been that her analysis of this faculty would provide the 'missing link' between the life of the citizen and the life of the mind."[90] For some critics, the need to find such a "bridge" is based on an equation of the action/thought distinction with a theory/practice distinction. Bradshaw states that her work "is an inquiry into the activity of theorizing about politics in general, that is, into the relation between theory and the practice of politics. Arendt is an appropriate vehicle for this inquiry because the investigation of the theory/practice relation is the dominant theme in her writings."[91] Ronald Beiner's work on Arendt, particularly his edition of her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, [92] has concentrated on how judging is positioned in her thought. My own concern here is not to bridge action and thought or theory and practice but, rather, to show that in developing a common ground between action and thought in the human condition of plurality, Arendt develops a correspondence between psyche and polity, appearance and the inner, the life of the citizen and the life of the mind. In short, while the common ground of plurality does not resolve these

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90 Dana Villa, "Thinking and Judging," in *The Judge and the Spectator: Hannah Arendt's political philosophy,* Edited by Joke J. Hermsen and Dana R. Villa (Belgium: Peeters, 1999), 9.

91 Leah Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 3.

92 Ronald Beiner, "Hannah Arendt on Judging" in Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy,* edited by Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). See also: Ronald Beiner, "A Commentary on Hannah Arendt's Unwritten Finale," *History of Political Thought*, 1/1 (1980): 117-135; "The Importance of Storytelling," *The Times Higher Education Supplement,* 16 July, 1982; "Hannah Arendt on Capitalism and Socialism," *Government and Opposition*, 25/3 (1990): 359-370.

distinctions, it shows how plurality can persevere, despite the modern elevation of the human condition of life and the dominance of "the social".

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

I) Critiquing Arendt

i) Plato and Socrates: a dubious distinction

We shall next address several problems relating to Arendt, beginning with her distinction between Socrates and Plato. Several commentators have argued that Arendt's approach to the making of distinctions is problematic. Kimberly Curtis, for example, speaks of "Arendt's overly rigid distinctions,"[93] while Albrecht Wellmer states that "I always have the feeling that these distinctions are designating limiting cases to which nothing in reality really corresponds."[94] Although we have seen that Arendt's unique approach to making distinctions has shed light on modernity, these very distinctions, on other occasions, might lead her into error. Specifically, Arendt draws a sharp distinction between Socrates and Plato, a distinction which, I think, is inconsistent, contradictory, and ultimately unfounded. Although there are several problems with Arendt's views on Socrates, I will limit my focus to those most relevant to the present topic.

First, Arendt's treatment of Socrates in *The Human Condition* is deeply inconsistent with that found in *The Life of the Mind.* In *The Human Condition,* Arendt states that "it is of no great importance whether Socrates himself or Plato discovered

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93 Kimberly Curtis, *Our sense of the real: aesthetic experience and Arendtian politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 76.

94 Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt" in Melvyn. A. Hill, ed. *Hannah Arendt: Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 325.

the eternal as the true center of metaphysical thought" [HC 20]. However, elsewhere in *The Human Condition*, Arendt insists that it was Plato who turned away from the *polis* towards the eternal, who required, moreover, that the *polis* serve philosophy: "it is only in Plato that concern with the eternal and the life of the philosopher are seen as inherently contradictory and in conflict with the striving for immortality, the way of life of the citizen, the *bios politikos*" [HC 20]. She also writes: "we find it in Plato's political philosophy, where the whole utopian reorganization of *polis* life is...directed by the superior insight of the philosopher, but has no aim other than to make possible the philosopher's way of life" [HC 14]. Furthermore, in *The Life of the Mind,* Arendt expounds her "belief that there exists a sharp dividing line between what is authentically Socratic and the philosophy taught by Plato" [LOM 168], insisting "that Plato used Socrates as *the* philosopher, not only in the early and clearly 'Socratic' dialogues but also later, when he often made him the spokesman for theories and doctrines which were entirely un-Socratic" [LOM 168].

Not only is Arendt's account of the distinction between Plato and Socrates frequently inconsistent, but its basis is inadequately defended. Instead, Arendt simply dismisses the debate surrounding the issue. On the only occasion in which she comments on the ground of this distinction, she simply states that "there is a great deal of controversy about the historical Socrates, and though this is one of the more fascinating topics of learned contention, I shall ignore it" [LOM 168]. Instead, a footnote refers us to "the inspired profile by the classicist and philosopher Gregory

Vlastos, 'The Paradox of Socrates'"[95] [LOM 250]. Although there may be some biographical validity to her claim, given that Socrates spent his life engaging Athenians and never left the *polis*, while Plato spent his time writing, founded a school, and tried to educate the tyrant of Syracuse, Arendt does not adequately explain why, in her view, Socrates was a "thinker", while Plato, whose political philosophy she considered "utopian" [HC 14], sought to establish a "doctrine" [LOM 104]. Nor does she even comment on the literature surrounding these issues. Indeed she admits elsewhere that "ignoring the main literature in my own field is something that should be held against me at some point, I think."[96]

Her distinction between Plato (whom Arendt insists represents eternity) and Socrates (whom she insists represents immortality) is both inconsistent and inadequately defended. Indeed, it might even be said that she reverses the two. One might propose that, insofar as Plato concerned himself with writing, he succeeded in enabling Socrates to be remembered, thereby "immortalizing" him. After commenting that it is unimportant whether it was Socrates or Plato who "discovered the eternal" [HC 20], Arendt continues by stating that "[i]t weighs heavily in favor of Socrates that he alone among the great thinkers - unique in this as in many other respects - never cared to write down his thoughts; for it is obvious that, no matter how concerned a thinker may be with eternity, the moment he sits down to write his thoughts he ceases

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95 Gregory Vlastos, *The Philosophy of Socrates: A Collection of Essays* (Anchor Books, New York, 1971).

96 Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in Melvyn. A. Hill, ed. *Hannah Arendt: Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 336.

to be concerned primarily with eternity and shifts his attention to leaving some trace of them. He has entered the *vita activa* and chosen its way of permanence and potential immortality" [HC 20]. Arendt has thus equated writing with acting and immortalizing. One might suggest that if Socrates had been too concerned with the eternal to write, but that Plato, through writing, succeeded in immortalizing his mentor, this, from Arendt's perspective, would seem contradictory. For, in Arendt's view, Socrates was her model for action whereas Plato initiated both a decline in political action and a rise in contemplation.

Socrates and Plato are two antithetical poles in her work. Socrates, in Arendt's view, was the only embodiment of both action and thought; of both the political and the inner. Plato's hostility towards plurality, on the other hand, set into motion a historical trend that has culminated in "the social." Indeed, Arendt's entire work seems to rest on this problematic distinction, such that her project can be seen as an attempt to undo the subsequent 'damage' done by Plato's historical influence on the "metaphysical and political thought throughout our tradition" [HC 16]. Thus, she champions an individual in whom she perceived thought and action to be neither separated nor opposed, namely, to the historical Socrates "undistorted" by Plato's hostility towards action, thought and plurality. If her Socrates/Plato distinction is indeed flawed, then her insistence that there has been a decisive historical rupture as a consequence is at serious risk of collapsing.

ii) Arendt's suspension of political prescriptions

The final criticism of Arendt concerns the limits or scope of Arendt's own work. It would seem that her critique of modernity remains both broad and vague. While critical of the *vita contemplativa* for turning its back on political concerns, her own work is often criticized for failing to outline specific political action. Kimberly Curtis states that Arendt's work "seems shockingly unrelated to achieving specific pragmatic ends"[97]; moreover, Curtis continues, it overemphasizes the extent to which thought can serve action and therefore become "ethically relevant."[98] Noel O'Sullivan, after labeling Arendt's work a kind of "Hellenic nostalgia," states that "her own solution is utopian."[99] Margaret Canovan similarly condemns Arendt's "dream of an elitist utopia,"[100] and her "baffling oscillation between concrete political proposals and utopian irresponsibility."[101] George McKenna criticizes Arendt's "excessive

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97 Kimberly Curtis, *Our sense of the real: aesthetic experience and Arendtian politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 17.

98 Curtis, page 49.

99 Noel K. O'Sullivan, "Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society," in *Contemporary Political Philosophers*, edited by de Crespigny and Minogue (New York: Dodds, Mead, 1975), 249.

100 Margaret Canovan, "The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought," *Political Theory* 6 (February 1978) : 23.

101 Canovan, page 8.

vagueness"[102] and her notion of "freedom so lacking in restraints and limits as to amount to a kind of willfulness."[103]

This critique of Arendt, however, can be refuted, for a closer reading of her work uncovers considerable nuance. Arendt states that thinking "gives no positive prescriptions" [LOM 190]; it "does not create values" [LOM 192]. Rather, thinking breaks down values, conventions and rules of conduct, and "relentlessly dissolves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules" [LOM 176]. It is "equally dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed" [LOM 176]. Elsewhere, in *The Recovery of the Public World*, a collection of essays presented at a conference in her honor, Arendt stated that "I would like to say that everything I did and everything I wrote - all that is tentative. I think that all thinking...has the earmark of being tentative."[104] Thinking must be continually rediscovered and recreated, and each person "must discover and ploddingly pave anew the path of thought" [LOM 210].

Arendt likened thinking to the unending task of Penelope's weaving as she awaits the return of Odysseus: "the business of thinking is like Penelope's web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before" [LOM 88]. Arendt described thought as "*Denken ohne Gelander*": "thinking without a banister."[105] She

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102 George McKenna, "Bannisterless Politics: Hannah Arendt and Her Children," *History of Political Thought* 5/2 (1984), 350.

103 McKenna, page 350.

104 Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt" in Melvyn. A. Hill, ed. *Hannah Arendt: Recovery of the Public World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 338.

105 Arendt, page 336.

expressed her concern that "the moment you give anybody a new set of values - or this famous 'banister' - you can immediately exchange it."[106]

We turn to her "model", Socrates. She insists that he did not lay down his life "for any specific belief or doctrine - he had none - but simply for the right to go about examining the opinions of other people, thinking about them and asking them to do the same" [LOM 168]. Unlike cognition, which is concerned with "specific results" [LOM 56], thinking "belongs among those *energeia* which...have their ends within themselves and leave no tangible outside end product" [LOM 129]. Thinking is a turning in circles, "the only movement, that is, that never reaches an end or results in an end product" [LOM 124]. However, this cyclical movement is not to be confused with the unending futility of labor. Rather, it is more akin to the aporietic character of the dialogues: "And because Socrates, asking questions to which he does *not* know the answers, sets them in motion, once the statements have come full circle, it is usually Socrates who cheerfully proposes to start all over again and inquire what justice or piety or knowledge or happiness are" [LOM 170].

We also observe that thinking is not entirely undermined by "the social". Although "the social" has the capacity to "exclude the possibility of action" [HC 40], thought is a far more resilient undertaking: "however seriously our ways of thinking may be involved in this crisis, our *ability* to think is not at stake; we are what men always have been--thinking beings" [LOM 11]. Indeed, it is only in times of crisis that

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106 Arendt, page 314.

thought's importance arises, as thought "has no political relevance unless special emergencies arise" [LOM 192]. We can see then that "the social" not only does not undermine thought but is a clarion call to thought: "thinking arises out of the disintegration of reality and the resulting *dis*-unity of man and world" [LOM 153]. Thinking therefore is not dependent on the space of appearance, as it "is the only activity that needs nothing but itself for its own exercise" [LOM 162]. Finally, recalling those commentators who accused Arendt of elitist tendencies, we observe Arendt's insistence that thought "is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present possibility for everybody" [LOM 191]. We also see this in her respect for *doxa,* namely, the opinion of the many: It was her "model", Socrates, who spent his time engaging Athenians in discourse while Plato, whom she condemns, turned his back on the *polis.*

II) Summary

In light of Arendt's statements regarding the *aporietic* character of thinking, we observe that writing a 'conclusion' on Arendt becomes paradoxical. Nonetheless, after this long journey through these two central texts, some final observations are in order. In the prologue to *The Human Condition,* Arendt selected, as a symbol for the crisis of modernity, the launching of a satellite (a human artifice *par excellence*, clearly the work of *homo faber*), in that it exemplified, for her, a disturbingly grandiose "rebellion against human existence as given" [HC 2].

In a similar vein, certain kinds of distorted speech may also be seen as an indication of the crisis of modernity, in that speech too may be a "rebellion against human existence as given" [HC 2]. Arendt has argued that "wherever the relevance of

speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being" [HC 4]. She adds, significantly, that modernity encourages us to "adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful" [HC 5]. The reader will recall the speech by Mike Harris, cited in Chapter One, in which he states that "what matters most to [the people of Ontario] is prudent management of their money."[107] This statement demonstrates the extent to which economic concerns have risen to a place of political dominance, and the extent to which political speech is now driven by concerns of the *oikos*, by "the human condition of life". Arendt, as we may recall, identifies unrestrained economic progress as a threat both to the human condition of plurality (as manifested in the public space of appearance) and to the life of the mind itself.

My objective in this thesis has not been to reconcile action and thought, but rather to show that in developing a common ground in the human condition of plurality, Arendt responds to the rise of "the social" and the elevation of the human condition of life, and develops a correspondence between various categories: psyche and polity, appearance and the inner, and the life of the citizen and the life of the mind. In my view, the common ground of plurality does not resolve these distinctions, but rather shows how, despite the modern elevation of "the human condition of life", plurality can persevere.

Arendt stated that her project was not "to find definite solutions" but to clarify ... the issues and gain... some assurance in confronting specific questions" [BPF 15].

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[107] The Budget of the Province of Ontario, February, 2001: www.gov.on.ca/Fin/bud01e/bud_highlights.htm.

She pursued this clarification in order to "gain experience in *how* to think" [Arendt's emphasis], which can be won "only through practice, through exercises" [BPF 15]. Hence, it was not Arendt's intention to offer either "definite solutions" or readily applicable political prescriptions. Indeed, her only prescription is to call us to think. Thus, we should not measure Arendt's work by the ease with which it fits into our preconceived assumptions. Perhaps her greatest contributions, then, lie in the insightfulness and originality or her work as well as the extent to which her work provides a compelling "exercise" in "how to think".

Unlike other pivotal thinkers, Arendt did not attempt to write a *magnum opus* that would systematically outline her definitive political philosophy. Rather, her works, whose interwoven themes invite her readers to explore all of the variegated contours of her thought, constitute open inquiries into politics. In considering *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind, Thinking*, covering some twenty years in Arendt's intellectual development, we have deepened our understanding of what lies at the core of her work: a highly original critique of modernity. This critique, however, does not take the form of prescriptions. In short, one cannot be an "Arendtian."

This thesis points toward many promising avenues for future exploration. First, Arendt's distinction between the contributions of Socrates and Plato should be examined more extensively as well as related to the works of other contemporary political thinkers, especially with respect to the breakdown of tradition. Second, her own account of thought should be compared and contrasted with that of her teacher, Martin Heidegger, in his seminal work on thinking, entitled *Was heist Denken? (What*

Is Called Thinking?).[108] Such research would contribute significantly to the debates surrounding Arendt's evolving views on Heidegger. Finally, the role of pedagogy should be explored in relation to its potential to enhance plurality.

In summary, this work has attempted to consider the connection between "the social" and thinking, and to point toward a series of previously unexplored issues in Arendt scholarship. However, in closing, perhaps we should be mindful of Arendt's words in the final pages of *The Life of the Mind:* "As I approach the end of these considerations, I hope that no reader expects a conclusive summary. For me to make such an attempt would stand in flagrant contradiction to what has been described here" [LOM 197].

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[108] Martin Heidegger. *Was heisst Denken?* Tubingen, 1984 (*What is Called Thinking?* Translated by Fred D. Neick and J. Glenn Gray. New York, 1968).

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