

UNIVERSIDAD DE NAVARRA  
FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS  
PROGRAMA DE DOCTORADO EN FILOSOFÍA

**HOW LOVE OF TRUTH LED TO RADICAL GOOD:  
HANNAH ARENDT'S PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNEY**

**Jennifer Kentaro Byarugaba**



**TESIS DOCTORAL**  
DIRECTOR:  
DR. LOURDES FLAMARIQUE ZARATIEGUI  
Pamplona, 2018



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*For Love and for all truth*



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## Abbreviations used

- AJC     Arendt, H., Jaspers, K., *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*
- BPF     Arendt, H. *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought.*
- CR     Arendt, H. *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics. Civil Disobedience. On Violence. Thoughts on Politics and Revolution.*
- EJ     Arendt, H. *Eichmann in Jerusalem A Report on the Banality of Evil.*
- EU     Arendt, H. *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954.*
- HC     Arendt, H. *The Human Condition.*
- JP     Arendt, H. *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern age.*
- JW     Arendt, H. *Jewish Writings*

LMT Arendt, H. *The Life of the Mind. I: Thinking.*

LMW Arendt, H. *The Life of the Mind. II: Willing.*

LSA Arendt, H. *Love and Saint Augustine.*

MDT Arendt, H. *Men in Dark Times.*

OR Arendt, H. *On Revolution.*

RJ Arendt, H. *Responsibility and Judgment.*

TOT Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.*

## Introduction

“It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never ‘radical,’ that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is ‘thought defying,’ as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its ‘banality.’ Only the good has depth and can be radical.”

Hannah Arendt  
*(The Jew as pariah)*

Hannah Arendt’s status as an intellectual celebrity has in recent years given way to an *Arendtian revival* to the extent that her work is being discussed, written about, and is being taught in virtually all fields in the humanities today. Then there is a way in which she was able to elevate the excellence of politics as human action to such an extent that others have been forced to rethink and question its true essence. Outstanding, without doubt, is her style based on a reflective attitude that seeks to understand through experience by engaging in a kind of *Denken ohne Geländer* (thinking without boundaries). This is contrary to the rigor that has typically been employed by traditional philosophers and has been rejected by some of her readers. Nevertheless, the real question that was posed from the outset without doubt was, “Why does Arendt say that

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only the good is radical?”. Everything hereafter, revolves around this question.

This research follows Hannah Arendt’s intellectual journey, which is characterised from the beginning by search for truth and the concern for human life. The prime intention and aim of this study is to analyse how Hannah Arendt comes to conceive evil and good, two concepts that play a central role in her philosophy and around which, her concept of evil revolves and acquires meaning. The aim is also to illustrate that her first inklings or intuitions and decisions about the factors or categories, that she identified as relevant and necessary to address the problems of her time, were maintained and continued to be in full coherence right from the outset of her philosophical formation up until her last papers and writings.

I posed a few primary questions as necessary guides to help me address my research. I found that the principal research question that needed to be answered was: Is Arendt’s ethics possible without metaphysics? This was a necessary question because Arendt was notoriously known for her rejection of traditional metaphysics. Having started reading Arendt’s work, it quickly became clear that she had drawn her own map of anthropological categories that she applied and which served to help explain historical events and phenomena in a philosophical way.

Here I am obliged to explain that Arendt does not disregard traditional philosophers. She respects some ancients of the likes of Aristotle and Socrates, Augustine and some more moderns such as Kant. Nevertheless, she was not afraid to strike out on her own and of ‘letting go’ of what she termed the ‘banister’ of traditional thought. Much as Arendt ‘let go of the banister’ she remained committed to action, plurality and natality. Much as she may have rejected the traditional

metaphysical means, she did not reject the historical form of transmission of philosophy. In other words, her rejection it did not stop her from philosophising in the most traditional sense. Understanding her method of thinking, apparently without ‘banisters’, or using traditional guides, which is not ‘groundless’ thinking, proved to me a challenge that I could not resist.

Arendt came up with her own anthropological categories or ‘guideposts’ so to speak, from which her political thought took its bearings. These have been called her *chief elements* or *thought trains* as others have preferred to call them. She herself has referred to them as the conditions under which men on earth have been given life (*The Human Condition*, pg. 7). The actual terminology applied to them is irrelevant. The point is that, with them, she is able to bridge the gap where traditional philosophical methods had failed to provide a philosophical explanation. It is with a descriptive analysis of these elements or categories that the first Chapter commences. In it, a fairly detailed account of her phenomenological and existential philosophical formation is provided.

With the reading of Arendt’s writings, it became clear that there is an overlap in different texts of her political and anthropological categories. This proved to be a challenge. The ones that were focused on in this work and that proved to be the valid ones under the given research topic principally include love of the world, plurality, natality and action. Arendt herself treats all these categories in a way that was neither sequential nor systematic. They came up necessarily at different points all throughout her work.

Therefore, right from the first chapter, it was thought best to move in a chronological order of publication of her work, in order to follow the first steps of the development of her thought, in a more systematic way.

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It is a method that I tried to follow more or less throughout this work, when analysing the different concepts. The starting point was usually in antiquity with some of the great ancient philosophers that Arendt herself highlights as a beginning point in order to understand her. In this way, it was possible to follow the establishment and formation of her central ideas regarding the human condition, all the way through to her later years as she matured as a writer.

Interestingly, it was found that several of her well-established ideas in her final years as a fully-fledged thinker, were formed in the early part of her philosophical career. Many of these ideas had been present from very early on in her formation as can be seen in her doctoral dissertation much as she does not use the terminology that she employs later.

Having seen man as a worldly being in the first chapter, in the second chapter of this work, full attention is drawn to man as a political being, capable of action. For Arendt, men act together in a *polis* as a plurality yet, at the same time, as individuals and more importantly, they act freely. One of the ways in which she managed to reawaken the desire for a deeper understanding of politics in modern times is fully laid out in her book, *The Human Condition*, where she gives a clear definition of action as differentiated from labour and work and describes man as a political being who forms part of the *polis*. Then, the unpredictability and boundlessness of action is described as well as Arendt's explanation of how the course of action can be altered by the use of promises and forgiveness. At the heart of her political action theory, one is able to discern true concern and love for the world. Her love for the world provided the answer to another of my research question which sought to establish if Arendt's political thought was merely a reaction to the European political and social crises or if her way of thinking provided consistent answers to the problems of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Part of this was

addressed in the previous chapter but for a more detailed analysis, it was necessary to find out the driving force that was at the root of her philosophical theories described above.

Arendt's necessity to be reconciled with the world, evidenced that she truly loved the word. She, and practically anyone who gave it any serious thought, is unable to easily fathom the reality of absolute evil in which one systematically engaged in an industrialised mechanism of destroying these human conditions that make men truly human. These are actions that Arendt felt, had to have a viable philosophical explanation which she proceeded to give even though her explanation risked being rejected. She was driven to get to the bottom of this because she truly cared and because of her desire to understand.

Action in this world had important consequences on her subsequent reflections on metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Her explanation of how political action can be moderated and how its course may be changed are commendable and fully laid out in chapter 2. For Arendt, political action is a necessity common to all men and is at the same time a tool that may be used to make men truly men. This is only so if action is truly free as ought to be the case in politics. There it was also seen how existence within the world, in conjunction with Augustine's emphasis on man as a beginner (*initium*) had a profound influence on Arendt's mature thinking. She will continue to quote Augustine all throughout her writings and publications and she will continue to emphasise that free action is political action.

A discussion and analysis of these central ideas in relation to political action necessarily brought up the moral conflicts and political problems of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which led to an analysis of the nature of evil in its radicality as well as its banality. Thus, in the third chapter, the discussion about radical evil was principally based on the case of

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Eichmann, the Third Reich, use and application of radical evil and its effect on the human condition. Also, a discussion of Arendt's understanding of the nature of evil, which in turn leads us to her analysis of radical evil – the attempt to change man *qua* man at an essential and existential level, was provided. The consequences of radical evil on both man the individual and man as a political being were then discussed. Her interest in racial evil led her to Jerusalem to cover the Eichmann trial and to use the term *banality of evil*. This was the cause of a major uproar especially among the Jews.

How people reacted to her reported on the Eichmann trial, was quite a blow but being the thinker that she was, the effect that it had on her was such that it led her to reflect more on the nature of radical evil as well as its banality. I was inevitably drawn to investigate how Arendt, the individual, took on this outcry and rejection from her 'own people' who were unable to share or partake of her views. Her reactions to facing this challenge of telling the truth in today's world is covered in the fourth chapter following the Arendtian style of applying her very own thought trains or chief elements.

Arendt's reaction, unlike Eichmann, who remained 'thoughtless' was to think. This in turn resulted in her highlighting the importance of thinking as an activity to avoid evil. She fearlessly faced the challenge of thinking the unthinkable and the probable possibility of its impossibility. It is from this that the relation between evil and thought emerged. It was through thinking that Arendt was able to understand and consequently to reconcile herself with rejection she had faced by being able to explain it.

Towards the end of her life, Arendt's political thought about radical evil took a major shift after the ensuing controversy. The renewed impetus for a better and deeper understanding of the concept of evil inevitably

led her to understand that evil is dependent on the concept of good. This realisation, helped me to address the second of my research questions which sought to establish how Arendt justified that only the good is radical as well as understanding what she meant by this. How this becomes evident is discussed in the final chapter of this work.

What was key, in addressing these questions, was the realisation that during the course of study of this work, I found that Arendt's vision of the human being. To her, man is one who is open to truth and is committed to the good, just as she herself was. Of special interest were her anthropological and ethical categories which she employed and applied in order for her to come to her conclusions.

The philosophical interrogation of Hannah Arendt's last outstanding concept of Radical Good, led to an understanding of what "good" experiences she considered to be radical and how she justified this characterisation. Above all, I was able to appreciate how the good was inevitably at the centre of her political theories even from the very beginning in her study on the concept of love in Augustine. Surprisingly, her need to defend truth and factual truth at that, continues to be a current issue in practically all the spheres of today's life be it political, technical or educational.

It was interesting and necessary to see how the universality of her ethical-political thought related and/or contrasted with those of other relevant contemporary philosophers. They are highlighted all through this doctoral work mainly as secondary bibliography that helped to locate her theories on the philosophical map but on a greater sphere.

Above all, I was drawn by Arendt's ardent desire to understand and more so by her untiring and bold efforts to tell the truth as she had

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understood it without obliging others to understand her way, much as it gave her great satisfaction when they did. It is never easy to tell the truth especially if they are hard truths. This is evidently one of the greatest challenges in today's political arena more so in our post-truth era. However, Arendt faced up to it firmly after the Eichmann trial, by focusing on the deeds of the accused and not on what the Jews had suffered.

Admittedly, each one of the chapters of this research work could have been fully developed into complete and independent research studies. An exhaustive analysis of each of them would have been too ambitious an attempt. Nevertheless, I did try to remain within the confines of the scope of Arendt's anthropological categories in the contemporary era. I also clarify that it was also not my intention to do an analysis of evil itself, nor of morality.

The methodology employed was to first of all begin by first reading all of Arendt's writings in a chronological order so as to establish the formation of her central ideas. Video and audio recordings of her also served as a rich source of information. The central ideas identified were then analysed within a philosophical context and compared with those of her other contemporary writers. These were then discussed and analyses of the arguments presented were done. I also took advantage of attending relevant online discussions on Hannah Arendt as well as holding, listening to and attending talks, seminars, conferences and workshops. My findings have been laid out here in this work in form of a descriptive study. Mention also needs to be made of the fact that there exists a vast collection of writings on Arendt's concept of radical evil that it was impossible to read all of it. A selection of the ones that were found to be most relevant was made to serve as secondary bibliography.

Reading Hannah Arendt over these years has been one of the most intriguing and eye-opening philosophical tasks and experiences that have resulted in the privilege of an in-depth understanding of her fundamental political theories in relation to her understanding of the human condition and the concepts of good and evil. I was able to talk and discuss with a number of Arendtian experts during a three month stay in Boston at the Hannah Arendt Centre where I also had access to Hannah Arendt's personal library. I also had at my disposal, the university library, UNIKA, Sabio, DADUN all of which are so highly equipped and current that there are times that I was left quite speechless. I had an ample and wide selection of resources that were generally available and when not, the library staff was able to make them available. To them and to all, I am very grateful.

This thesis became a reality due to the help and support of many, too numerous to mention. Nevertheless, there are a few that deserve special mention. My deep appreciation goes first to the Asociación de Amigos of Universidad de Navarra without whom I would not have been here to begin with. Their tireless effort to make access to this university possible to people from all walks of life, gives us a chance to make necessary and hopefully far reaching changes when we go back to our home societies. I am indebted to Professor Lourdes Flamarique, for her tireless effort to guide and direct me all throughout this academic journey. My sincere thanks also to the members and staff of Strathmore University, who were left to hold fort during my leave of absence. Above all, my heartfelt gratitude to my family, expanded and otherwise, and friends, who supported me in more ways than one especially with priceless prayer. And then there is Hannah Arendt herself, whose philosophical audacity has served as an inspiration to me. Thank you all.



## Chapter 1: Hannah Arendt's love for the world

Hannah Arendt has always had a dire 'need to understand', something that she claims was there from very early on<sup>1</sup>. This 'need' drove her on in her fearless confrontation with truth. The aim of this chapter therefore, is to show how her primary philosophical formation gave rise to the principal ideas of her political theory which she sustained all through her political career. The nature and foundations of these principal ideas, will be defined as well as the process of their formation which, will be shown to have arisen out of her love and concern for the world. For if there is concern, there is love, and if there is love, there is a desire to understand.

### 1.1 Person and Context

It is well known that Hannah Arendt's career begun with an exploration of Augustine's theory of love, which she published in 1929 as *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*. She later edited an English equivalent of it with revisions to the original version, as *Love and Saint Augustine*, set to

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<sup>1</sup> This book, entitled *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954*, is a compilation of essays written by Arendt between 1930—1954. (Arendt, H. *Essays in Understanding 1930 – 1954*. Kohn, J. (Ed.) New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994) It shall consequently be abbreviated to EU. Reference made here is on page 8 of this book.

be published at a later date (1964-1965)<sup>2</sup>. As a young German Jew, she entered Marburg University in Germany, where she studied Philosophy in 1924. According to Hans Jonas, her contemporary student and good friend during her university years, Arendt possessed “an intensity, an inner direction, an instinct for quality, a groping for essence, a probing for depth”<sup>3</sup> apart from being “exceptional” and “attractive” as well.<sup>4</sup> Young-Bruehl, who wrote Arendt’s biography also describes her as one who responded to passionate thinking as well as having “extraordinary abilities” and yet at the same time, she also describes her as being “shy” and “childlike”<sup>5</sup>. Prinz affirms, “Hannah did not conform to ‘merely living’, with just ‘hanging in there’. She wanted more, but, how was she to attain this? She knew well: she had to follow this impulse to ‘understand’ which, for her, had turned into a question of life and death. And she believed that this need could be fulfilled, above all, with philosophy.”<sup>6</sup>

Before she joined Marburg, her mother had arranged for her to study at the University of Berlin where she spent several semesters. There she chose to study among others, Greek and Latin as well as Christian theology<sup>7</sup>, which was taught by Romano Guardini<sup>8</sup> a predominant

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<sup>2</sup> Arendt, H. (1996). *Love and Saint Augustine* (1st ed.). Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, pg. 115. This book will consequently be abbreviated to LSA.

<sup>3</sup> My translation from Jonas, H. (2005) *Memorias*. Comín, G. (Trans.). Madrid: Losada, pgs. 3-5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Young-Bruehl, E. (1982), *Hannah Arendt, for love of the world*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pgs. 49 & 61.)

<sup>6</sup> My translation from Prinz, A., (2001). *La filosofía como profesión o el amor al mundo. La vida de Hannah Arendt*. Barcelona: Herder, pgs. 39-49.

<sup>7</sup> In an interview with Günter Gaus held in 1968 and as transcribed and translated in the book, *Essays in Understanding*, she was asked how she had come to study theology and philosophy at the university. Section of corresponding interview below:

purveyor of Christian existentialism. In Marburg having just turned eighteen, she met Martin Heidegger who later started the supervision of her thesis. In that year, she also signed up for theology seminars with Rudolf Bultmann on the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Arendt and Jonas were his only Jewish students<sup>10</sup>.

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GAUS: You studied in Marburg, Heidelberg, and Freiberg with professors Heidegger, Bultmann, and Jaspers; with a major in philosophy and minors in theology and Greek. How did you come to choose these subjects?

ARENDT: You know, I have often thought about that. I can only say that I always knew I would study philosophy. Ever since I was fourteen years old.

GAUS: Why?

ARENDT: I read Kant. You can ask; Why did you read Kant? For me the question was somehow: I can either study philosophy or I can drown myself, so to speak. But not because I didn't love life! No! As I said before-I had this need to understand. . . . The need to understand was there very early. You see, all the books were in the library at home; one simply took them from the shelves.

GAUS: Besides Kant, do you remember special experiences in reading?

ARENDT: Yes. First of all, Jaspers's *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* [Psychology of World Views], published, I believe, in 1920. I was fourteen. Then I read Kierkegaard, and that fit together.

GAUS: Is this where theology came in?

ARENDT: Yes. They fit together in such a way that for me they both belonged together. I had some misgivings only as to how one deals with this if one is Jewish . . . how one proceeds. I had no idea, you know. I had difficult problems that were then resolved by themselves. Greek is another matter. I have always loved Greek poetry. And poetry has played a large role in my life. So I chose Greek in addition. It was the easiest thing to do, since I read it anyway!" (EU 8-9).

<sup>8</sup> He was born in 1885 and died in 1968. He was a Catholic theologian of Spanish origin, who lectured in Bonn and Berlin. He was made to retire during Hitler's regime. He was named Professor at the University of Tübingen. He is well known for his work with the youth. He wrote his own autobiography. Guardini, R. (1992), *Apuntes para una autobiografía*. Madrid: Encuentro.

<sup>9</sup> Young-Bruehl, E. (1982), *Hannah Arendt: For love of the World*, pg. 61.

<sup>10</sup> Jonas, H. (2003) *Memorias*, pg. 111.

Jonas describes the university atmosphere that surrounded them at that time in his autobiography entitled, *Hans Jonas Erinnerungen*<sup>11</sup>. First, he says, the majority of Heidegger's followers were Jewish who had a profound veneration bordering on adoration for him. According to him, these students saw Heidegger as some kind of semi-god and thought themselves to be in possession of divine truth. Their arrogance was repugnant to both him and Arendt and so a special relationship developed between the two who wanted to 'do philosophy'<sup>12</sup> and not simply adulate Heidegger's ideas<sup>13</sup>. At that time, in the 1920s, Young-Bruehl explains, German academic philosophy was as described by Jonas to be "either derivative or it was a rebellion of the philosophers against philosophy in general, rebellion against, or doubt of its identity."<sup>14</sup> According to Young-Bruehl, Arendt rejected both the derivatives and instead opted for 'the way of the rebels who doubted philosophy's traditional identity.'<sup>15</sup>

After a year in Marburg, Arendt decided to go to Freiburg where she spent a semester studying under Edmund Husserl.<sup>16</sup> In 1926, she moved to Heidelberg to study with Heidegger's friend and existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers with whom she eventually wrote her dissertation on the concept of love in St. Augustine<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pg. 108-113.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pg. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Young-Bruehl, E. (1982), *Hannah Arendt: For love of the World*, pg. 60.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* pg. 45.

<sup>16</sup> It was thought that this would be the best option given the nature of the relationship that had developed between the Arendt and Heidegger which had become physically intimate.

<sup>17</sup> Her dissertation was later published as a book. (Arendt, H. (1996). In Scott J. V., Stark J. C. (Eds.), *Love and Saint Augustine* (1st ed.). Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.)

Karl Jaspers later become her lifelong friend. In the letters that she wrote to him, she always addressed him as *Lieber Verehrtester*<sup>18</sup> meaning Dear Most Honoured or Esteemed One.<sup>19</sup> He was most dear to her and honoured by her as well. In an article she published on him in German in 1947<sup>20</sup>, her description of him and her gratitude clearly show the affection she had for him. The tone in her letters as well as the issues she was able to address with open confidence are an indication of the complete confidence and trust she had in him. This is more so in the letters after July 1946.

Adolf Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor in January 1933. Before that time, there was a lot of indoctrination of students in schools where they learnt the “difference” between a Jew and an "Arier" which meant a true German according to the Nazis’ point of view. This was done in a subject called *Rassenkunde* which is the study of race. There was constant propaganda that was pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic. It came through in form of songs, posters, cinemas and the radio on a more or less constant basis. As is well known, people who showed signs of being less than Nazi-friendly were arrested and all were afraid of the Gestapo.<sup>21</sup>

It is in this environment that Arendt attended university and was first aroused to raise deep philosophical questions about life, love and

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<sup>18</sup> Refer to letters in Arendt, H., Jaspers, K., (1993). *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*. San Diego etc.: Harcourt Brace & Company. This reference will consequently be abbreviated to AJC.

<sup>19</sup> This might sound rather stiff or even cold in English but that is not the case in German especially in those years (1926 - 1969).

<sup>20</sup> Published in German as “Zueignung an Karl Jaspers” in *Sechs Essays*, Heidelberg, 1948.

<sup>21</sup> Refer also to Reitlinger, G. (1968). *The Final Solution: The Attempt to Exterminate the Jews of Europe*. Mitchell, London: Vallentine, pgs. 4-5.

understanding. The next task is to proceed to show that Arendt tried to understand the world, because she loved the world.

## 1.2 Desire to understand

As mentioned previously, Hannah Arendt has always had the desire to know and to understand and to get to the very heart of things. It explains why at the age of fourteen, for example, she read Kant's *Critique of Reason*. This so aroused her curiosity that she then read Jaspers and then Kierkegaard.<sup>22</sup> This desire never left her, haunting her well into her future quest for answers. The same desire led her to study philosophy at the university.

A more mature approach in her search to understand is seen in a philosophical question raised at the university that she addressed to Karl Jaspers, regarding the correct interpretation of history. It is the very first recorded letter of their correspondence, in and it dates back to Heidelberg, July 15, 1926. (AJC 3)

“I can understand history only from the perspective which I myself occupy. ... That would mean that I try to interpret history, try to understand what is expressed in it, from the perspective I have gained through my own experience. What I am able to understand in this way I make my own; what I cannot understand I reject. If I have understood your view correctly, then I ask:

How is it possible, on the basis of this view of the interpretation of history, to learn something new from history? Doesn't it make history simply a sequence of illustrations for what I want to say and for what I already know without benefit of history?

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to the same interview mentioned in footnote 7.

To submerge oneself in history would thus mean no more than finding an abundant source of appropriate examples.” (AJC 3)<sup>23</sup>

The ‘perspective which I myself occupy’ cited above, given Arendt’s historical time frame, is one of pre-war Germany. At about this time, Hitler was trying to deal with the so-called ‘Jewish Question’ and aimed at the ‘extinction of World Jewry as a political power’<sup>24</sup>. Why this was necessary raised questions that were hard for any Jew to understand, let alone responsible German citizens. A historical study provided some answers but Arendt was quick to understand the importance of how history is told.

Naturally, how history is told, understood and interpreted is of vital importance if one is interested in really understanding the world. This is why this early correspondence is an indicator of Arendt’s true interests that were there from the very beginning.<sup>25</sup> The next thing she does in an attempt to understand the world, in her given context of pre-war Germany, is to write her dissertation<sup>26</sup>. In it, one sees an even more ambitious attempt when she struggles to understand both the world and

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<sup>23</sup> This letter was written in her second year at university.

<sup>24</sup> Reitlinger, G. (1968). *The Final Solution*, pg. 4-5. An in-depth description of Arendt’s surrounding circumstances can be read in the first chapters of Young-Bruehl’s biography of Arendt (Young-Bruehl, E. (1982). *Hannah Arendt, for love of the world.*) as well as in Gutiérrez’s work (Gutiérrez de Cabiedes, T., (2009). *El hechizo de la comprensión: vida y obra de Hannah Arendt*. Madrid: Encuentro).

<sup>25</sup> Refer also to an article published by Urabayen, J., (2012) entitled, “Telling Stories. Story and History in Arendt’s Thought” DADUN, for a detailed explanation of the role of history in Arendt’s thought.

<sup>26</sup> She defended it in 1924.

love itself among men (*caritas*) based on her interpretation of Saint Augustine<sup>27</sup>.

Her quest to understand continued throughout her life and answers were not always forthcoming. There were answers and methods that she later rejected and others on which she built her own responses and many that she simply ignored. For example, is her original query in as far as the traditional method of interpretation of events was concerned, she rejects the usual method of following a more or less lineal or progressive historical narrative. Instead, Arendt preferred to identify a particular case. She would then base her explanations and make assumptions based on that particular case<sup>28</sup> without making general conclusions, by also taking into account the specific context.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> It can be said that Augustine has had a vast influence on Western traditional philosophical thinking. It may also be said that he was her first subject upon whom she tested her then phenomenology of what love is.

<sup>28</sup> Camps claims Arendt was obsessed by starting from the singular and concrete when it came to making moral judgements. She is of the opinion that because of this, Arendt had problems in accepting that moral judgements consist of subjecting a particular case to the general rule – not the other way around (Camps, V., (2006). “Hannah Arendt, La moral como integridad.” In *El siglo de Hannah Arendt*, Barcelona: Paidós, D.L. Básica 127, pg. 67) (my translation).

<sup>29</sup> Further examples are evident from her books that were written soon after her dissertation such as *Men in Dark Times* (Arendt, H., (1968). *Men in Dark Times*. New York [etc.]: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Henceforth abbreviated to MDT) or her second book *Rahel Varnhagen* (Arendt, H., (1974). *Rahel Varnhagen*. San Diego [etc.]: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) or *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt, H. (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994. Henceforth abbreviated to EJ), or in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, H. (1960). *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed). New York: Meridian books. Henceforth abbreviated to TOT). Many times, she first takes the trouble to explain the historical surroundings, the society at the time and the meaning of key concepts before finally explaining totalitarianism itself. Her writings in *Between Past and Future* also serve as a good example. In this way she diverts from the traditional

For example, in *The Human Condition*<sup>30</sup> she explains that the best way to understand a historical event is by withdrawing from it so as to view it as a spectator. For her to understand, “alienation” or a sort of distancing “from the surrounding, world or earth”<sup>31</sup> are vital<sup>32</sup>. This idea seems to be similar to her understanding of how Augustine arrives at the question, not of understanding of events, but of self-understanding. As can be seen from the following,

“Whoever wishes to say ‘I am,’ and to summon up his own unity and identity and put it against the variety and multiplicity of the world, must withdraw into himself, into some inner region, turning his back on whatever the “outside” can offer. It is in this context that Augustine definitely departs from contemporary philosophical teachings, Stoic and Neoplatonic, and strikes out on his own. ... For the more he (Augustine) withdrew into himself and gathered his self from the dispersion and distraction of the world, the more he “became a question to himself” [*quaestio mihi factus sum*]” (LSA 24)

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way of interpretation that was lineal or progressive. It seems that to her each case was distinct and unique and therefore probably new. This could explain why she generally did not generalise.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt, H., (1998). *The Human Condition* (2nd ed.). Chicago u.a.: Univ. of Chicago Press. This reference will henceforth be abbreviated to HC.

<sup>31</sup> “The greater the distance between himself and his surroundings, world or earth, the more he will be able to survey and to measure.” (LSA 251)

<sup>32</sup> Arendt also speaks of a second kind of *world*-alienation which is different from the afore mentioned *self*-alienation being addressed in the text above. Nevertheless, both are vitally important to Arendt. Richard J Bernstein, an American philosopher who has studied Hannah Arendt’s writings, seems to share this view because for him, by world-alienation in totalitarianism, where one is forcibly kept from sharing a common world from a plurality of perspectives with fellow human beings, causes one to lose something of their humanity (Bernstein, R.J., (1996). *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, pg. 82).

The issue and importance she attaches to “alienation” is evident at this stage and it would not be too far-fetched to assume that this idea of alienation is made manifest here. Also given her nature as a rather independent thinker, one could add that perhaps what might have attracted her to this idea is the fact that it entailed a rather rebellious element. She states that it was a departing or “striking out on his own” and that he (Augustine) “definitely departs from contemporary philosophical teachings” from what was the norm that time. Given the German academic philosophical atmosphere then, this seeming desire for ‘rebellion’ is not at all surprising.<sup>33</sup>

What is clear so far, is her rejection or rebellion against the traditional way of thinking and philosophical interpretation and a desire to ‘strike out on her own’ so to speak. What was also clear is her desire to truly understand as well as her thirst for ultimate answers even when these gave rise to other questions. Her quest was for genuine knowledge of the truth, of the world and of man.

Having described Arendt’s surrounding historical context, it will be well to now look at her main ideas in her philosophical formation and growth along the years that later developed into her full-fledged political theory and outlook. What is key and undeniable are her existentialist ideas as shall now be shown.

### 1.2.1 Existentialist ideas

It will be best to begin with a brief introduction of when this idea first seems to have taken root. One of the earliest articles Arendt seems to have written in which her existentialist ideas were strongly put forth is in

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<sup>33</sup> See section 1.2 of this work.

her 1930 article entitled “Philosophy and Sociology.” It was originally published in German as “Philosophie und Soziologie: Anlässlich Karl Mannheim, Ideologie und Utopie” in *Die Gesellschaft*, VII/2, Berlin.<sup>34</sup> In it she quotes Karl Jaspers who like her, advocates for the individual as key in order to understand human existence. She says, “Karl Jaspers has made human existence the primary subject of philosophy.” (EU 31) With her as well, man is the primary subject. Hints of this are detected as early as in her doctoral thesis. Her emphasis at this stage was on turning back to the self or to the individual as being fundamental (LSA 46). Even at that stage when she isolated man, she would simultaneously claim that ‘human beings belong together’ (ibid. 95). Similarly, in other texts of the same thesis she writes, “The individual is not alone in this world” (ibid. 100) and when she talks about the social life in the last chapter, she still highlights the fact that they are all individual members.

As had already been mentioned, Arendt was attracted by philosophical teachings that went against what was usually taught. It is also known that “She rejected both derivative metaphysicians as well as those who renounced philosophy in favour of a vague and misty irrationalism thereby taking the way of the rebels who doubted philosophy’s traditional identity”<sup>35</sup>. Instead, she as well as others who at that time were like minded, were attracted by a different kind of philosophy. In a speech Arendt gave to celebrate Heidegger’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, she describes how rumour had it, when she was starting university, that

“[T]here was someone who was actually attaining “the things” that Husserl had proclaimed, someone who knew that these things were not academic matters but the concerns of thinking men—concerns not just of yesterday and today, but from time

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<sup>34</sup> A collection of these and other essays were published in the book entitled *Essays in Understand* cited earlier.

<sup>35</sup> Young-Bruehl, E (1982) *Hannah Arendt For Love of the World*, pg. 49.

immemorial—and who, precisely because he knew that the tradition was broken, was discovering the past anew (...)<sup>36</sup>

Husserl also stressed the importance of going back to the things themselves — in this case man being ‘the thing’ itself. For Arendt, Husserl’s idea ‘had a liberating influence in the sense that man himself, (...) once again became the main concern of philosophy.’<sup>37</sup> Arendt at that time, like others, was ready for passionate thinking and naturally found this attractive otherwise, neither she nor any of the others, would not have been drawn to him. She was in search of truth. Describing it as ‘liberating’ indicates a kind of implied stifling and a desire to want to break free, so to speak. Earlier, Young-Bruehl commented on this rebellious streak that both Arendt and Jonas shared. It also probably explains why it was common for students to move to other universities during the course of their studies.

Jaspers was a strong advocate for academic freedom during those years – another highly attractive factor for Arendt. She saw in him a trustworthy guide for rational discussion<sup>38</sup>. She maintained a close friendship with both him and his wife until his death in 1969. In a 1947, Arendt wrote a dedicatory preface to her *Sechs Essays* addressed to Jaspers (EU 212-216)<sup>39</sup>. Her claims in it show the kind of influence that he had on her:

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<sup>36</sup> Arendt, H., “Martin Heidegger at 80.” In *The New York Review of Books*, 17/8: pg. 30-39. Hofstadter, A., (Trans.).

<sup>37</sup> Arendt, H. (a collection of articles on Jewish issues written between 1942 and 1966). *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (1 Evergreen). Feldman, R. H. (Ed.) New York: Grove Press: distributed by Random House, pg. 166. Henceforth, this book will be abbreviated to JP.

<sup>38</sup> Young-Bruehl, E. (1982). *Hannah Arendt, for love of the world*, pg. 64.

<sup>39</sup> She makes reference to this dedication in at least three of her letters to him. Refer to AJC letters 93, 94, 95, 112.

“What I learned from you and what helped me in the ensuing years to find my way around in reality (...) is that the only thing of importance is not philosophies but the truth, that one has to live and think in the open and not in one’s own little shell, no matter how comfortably furnished it is.” (EU 213)

What we have here is her dedication to find the truth and her willingness to go far in order to achieve and/or understand it as well as her openness to new ideas if this was necessary. Arendt would have stopped at nothing short of having found the truth and this would consequently mean, getting to ultimate answers, if her philosophy is or was sound as I hope to show. Jaspers himself admired her pursuit of unvarnished truth exemplary, her ‘independence and her freedom from any ideology or any political power’ (AJC xix). Some of this can be seen in a letter that he wrote to her from Basel on 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1963. (AJC 504)

Her admiration for him was such that in this dedicatory letter, she admits to having imitated him; “Back then, I was sometimes tempted to imitate you, even in your manner of speech, because that manner symbolised for me a human being who dealt openly and directly with the world, a human being without ulterior motives.” (AJC 214)

It is therefore possible to argue that she copied his existentialist ideas from him. It is known that he was one of the leading representatives of existentialist philosophy in Germany in the 1920s. However, we must remember that she actually started with the existentialist ideas before she came to know him since she started her dissertation with Martin Heidegger, who was the other main existentialist philosopher in Germany at that time.

Arendt studied under Heidegger in Marburg. Her personal relationship with him is well known and has been documented at length and is not relevant to this work. I will only highlight the fact that she, like several

other students, was drawn to attend his lectures which became the published text of *Sein und Zeit*. Heidegger at this time had acquired fame among the students for his so called “rebellious element” in his teachings because he broke away from tradition. Heidegger challenged the philosophy being taught in German universities in the 1920s claiming that despite all their academic talk about philosophy, they were unable to respond to his challenge to distinguish “between an object of scholarship and a matter of thought”.<sup>40</sup> It is also known that Arendt was drawn to him both as a great thinker and on more intimate terms and that their relationship lasted for several years even after Arendt had moved to America.

She was also familiar with Søren Kierkegaard, who is generally considered to have been the first existentialist philosopher and to whom, in this regard, she usually made reference to. In one of her 1932 articles, she states that “Modern existential philosophy begins with Kierkegaard<sup>41</sup>.” (EU 173) Elsewhere, she will state that, “Kierkegaard speaks with a contemporary voice; he speaks for an entire generation that is not reading him out of historical interest but for intensely personal reasons: *mea res agitur*.” (ibid., 44)

In other words, Kierkegaard’s view is of interest to her personally. She is of the same mind and she finds his message relevant at the time. This is mainly because for her as pointed out earlier, individuality is an

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<sup>40</sup> Heidegger, M., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pg. 5. It is a composition of his works that were put together and translated by Albert Hofstadter, in 1971 with his consent. (Heidegger, M., (1971). *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Hofstadter, A., (Trans.) New York: Harper.)

<sup>41</sup> It is only several years after his death that he became famous in Germany. This could have been either because his articles had not yet been translated into German or because of the cultural climate at that time. At least, these are the possible explanations given by Arendt. (EU 44-45)

important factor whenever one is dealing with the human being and all aspects that are related to him. The idea of the individual is at the fore in an article in which she defended Kierkegaard's existentialist position in 1932, that places emphasis on the human subject. She says, "In Kierkegaard's view philosophy is (was) so caught up in its own systematics that it forgets and loses sight of the actual self of the philosophising subject: it never touches the 'individual' in his concrete 'existence'." (ibid., 45) Arendt was all for putting the individual at the centre.

Hence, for her, the opening up of dimensions of the world and of human life that had previously remained invisible to philosophy was crucial because it 'meant the salvation of the individual's subjectivity' (ibid.). This, in the Germany of that time (the article was published in 1932) seemed crucial and she saw it as an urgent need. In this article, therefore, she strongly defends this stand. She excuses and tries to explain his lack of fame in Germany precisely because of the conditions then in pre-war Germany. She goes on to defend him against Hegel and explains how both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche mark the end of Romanticism.

Much as the themes on existentialist ideas barely came out in her dissertation, she boldly discussed them in her article *What is Existential Philosophy*. It was published in the *Partisan Review* in 1946. In it, for example she says, "[A] Self, taken in its absolute isolation, is meaningless; and if it is not isolated but is involved in the everyday life of the They, it is no longer Self." (EU 180). In this article, her views are seemingly independent views and she actually declares her independence from Heidegger going so far as to refuting some of his theories. For example she says; 'He (Heidegger) attempts to escape this' (ibid.), or, 'Heidegger has drawn on mythologizing and muddled concepts (...) in an effort to supply his isolated Selves with a shared, common ground to stand. But it is obvious that concepts of that kind can

only lead us out of philosophy and into some kind of nature-oriented superstition.’ (ibid., 181) She also writes, ‘Heidegger has never really established his ontology, because the second volume of *Sein und Zeit* has never appeared. (...) It has ended instead with a thin brochure titled *Was ist Metaphysik?*, in which Heidegger shows with reasonable consistency and despite all his obvious verbal tricks and sophistries that Being in a Heideggerian sense is Nothingness (ibid., 176). Nevertheless, she gives credit to where it is due and attributes to him the claim that in man, essence and existence are identical (*Dasein*) (ibid., 177-179) much as she later refutes it as a seductive idea claiming that if this were so, then man would have to be God (ibid., 178).

All these are strong rebukes against one’s former teacher but they are included here to help to illustrate her independent thought from his. They also bring out her strong personality and independence from other philosophers with whom she did not share views, regardless of who or how renowned they were.

For her, like Jaspers, truth is graspable by every common human being (EU 442) and not just by a few ‘experts’. Man has always questioned Being but now he was becoming conscious of his consciousness and has begun to think about thinking on his own. “Thinking, (...) in order to attain to truth at all, becomes practical” (ibid., 441) and this, according to both Arendt and Jasper, is what thinking is all about – to get to truth. In this way, man is able to become master of his thoughts and consequently to philosophise which is not the highest ‘existential’ mode of being but a preparation for encountering reality (ibid., 184) and consequently reaching truth.

Hegel was a popular philosopher during Arendt’s times. However, she speaks against him for trivialising the individual and his life. She does so in a 1932 article entitled “Søren Kierkegaard”, published in German in

*Frankfurter Zeitung*, No. 75 –76. She explains, “This trivialisation occurs because Hegel’s dialectic and synthesis do not address the individual in his specific existence but, rather, treat individuality and specificity as abstractions.” (EU 46)

For her as seen earlier, individuality and specificity is core and far from being trivial in order to understand man. So is the individual’s life since each individual lives and has his own individual history all of which result in experiences that are particular and are both vital and necessary in order to understand him.

Further, she writes,

‘In Kierkegaard’s view, Hegel negates concrete reality, contingency, and therefore the individual when he interprets history as a logically comprehensible sequence of events and a process that follows an inevitable course. This polemic against Hegel is a polemic against any and every philosophical system.’ (EU 46)

In other words, with Kierkegaard, she is of the view that if one is to consider man, he should be considered as a whole, within given context, be it historical or otherwise, as an individual, and always with the view that he is not an isolated being but that he lives, as Arendt stresses, in communion with others.<sup>42</sup>

It is these existentialist views that will be evident when she talks about specific personalities. She describes the different personalities in their varied contexts and yet necessarily emphasises that much as they are all men, they are also different and distinct. A real individual is unique and

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<sup>42</sup> Here one can already palpate the inklings of Arendt’s concept of plurality which she fully developed in *The Human Condition*.

different from all the others and therefore, ‘many superfluous detailed characteristics’ (EU 75) are necessary for anyone to be classified as an individual.

Nevertheless, Arendt’s existentialist ideas do not go to the extreme of existentialism. Meaning, she is not a radical existentialist who only sees man, the individual and thereby places man at the centre making him the sole and only reference or point of departure in her reasoning. Rather, she sees him as a whole individual thinking being, capable of attaining truth, but who needs others to confirm his reality as shall be seen in subsection 1.4.

It is worth noting that at about that time, Heidegger is known to have placed special emphasis on phenomenological and existential aspects of Augustinian thought.<sup>43</sup> Arendt being his student at about this time, and already being drawn to these ideas, is therefore likely to have let herself be influenced by this, when she chose to do her thesis on Augustine’s exploration of love and the world.

### 1.3 Love and Saint Augustine

Arendt starts her doctoral thesis by studying the concept of love, in a likely attempt to understand herself, man and the world. A brief look at Arendt’s understanding of the concept of love, will help to shade more light on how she interprets good and evil in later years, both of which are of fundamental interest to this work.

In this search, she is continuously drawn to the fact that, “Augustine’s every perception and every mark about love refer at least in part to his

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<sup>43</sup> For a more detailed account refer to Flamarique, L. (Flamarique, L. (2013). “Practicar la verdad. Sintonías y disonancias de Heidegger con el libro X de Confesiones”. In *Tópicos, Revista de Filosofía*, 0(44), pgs.115–148).

love of neighbour. (AJC 3) Here, at the very beginning of her dissertation in the introduction, we get the first inklings of both individuation (LSA 98, 99, 108–109) and collectivity (LSA 100, 108–109). She realises the importance of the individual and how they ought to have an orderly love of self as well as of God and consequently, the relevance of the presence of a neighbour in order to be able to love. These ideas later develop into her existentialist ideas regarding the individual and plurality respectively as shall be seen in detail shortly.

However, at this stage in *Love and Saint Augustine*, she identifies love (*caritas*) as what links one to ones' neighbour (LSA 93) and with Augustine agrees that *caritas* is the root of all good (ibid., 17). These two theses run parallel throughout her dissertation<sup>44</sup> featuring in both Parts 1 and 2 of it (AJC 18–19, 38, 98–102, 108, 112). At a later stage, reference will again be made to *caritas* being at the root of all good. This is of primary importance and there will be a need to come back to it in the chapter dedicated to radical Good.

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<sup>44</sup> One might do well to suppose that her existentialist ideas which were made manifest in this work could have been provoked by Heidegger whose seemingly rebellious element against the traditional forms of philosophical thought she found so attractive. Nevertheless, her major concern throughout this work continues to be the concept of love. This can be seen since a greater part of her dissertation is dedicated just to explain what is understood by the concept of love – *caritas* – and how Augustine explains it. One could also argue that it coincides with Arendt's relationship with Heidegger. Nevertheless, she is highly interested in understanding what love is and at this point, her reference is Augustine. She discusses love itself (LSA 36–44), love of God (LSA 39, 98, 182), love of self (LSA 19–20, 30–31, 37–38, 39, 45), love of neighbour (LSA 93–97, 152–154) and love of the world (LSA 17, 37, 66, 77, 81–82, 159).

Arendt emphasises that the object of love<sup>45</sup> craved for by man, needs to be possessed in order for man to be happy and for the craving to stop. She goes further to explain that we love because we want to be happy. To reach happiness or to actually be happy she says, implies that we possess what we desire or crave for (the object). In other words, the desire stops with possession of the desired object. For Augustine, the object is either man's ultimate goal<sup>46</sup> or the mundane world<sup>47</sup> depending on the choice made by the individual. For him, "Happiness occurs when the gap between lover and beloved has been closed, and the question is whether *cupiditas*, the love of this world, can ever attain it." (LSA 19) Arendt also questions this. As can be seen from the citation, to be happy by loving the world would mean that the beloved (the world), has become a permanently inherent element of man's own being — a phenomena whose possibility she herself questions. How can man possibly possess the world? Can the gap that exists between man and the world actually be closed?

"The motion of love as desire comes to an end with the possession of the beloved and the holding (*tenere*) of its object. Only in possession does isolation really end, and this end is the same as happiness. (...) Happiness is achieved only when the beloved becomes a permanently inherent element of one's own being (...).  
Happiness occurs when the gap between lover and beloved has been closed, and the question is whether *cupiditas*, the love of this world, can ever attain it." (LSA 19)

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<sup>45</sup> When Augustine speaks about love of the world he refers to two kinds of love; *caritas* – the road that connects man with his ultimate goal (LSA 34) – as well as *cupiditas* – mundane (worldly) love that clings to the world and leads to death. These are distinguished by the object of love. (LSA 77)

<sup>46</sup> Man's ultimate goal in the case of Augustine is heaven, the *vita beata*. (LSA 19)

<sup>47</sup> There are also two worlds that are referred to in this book; this world and the world to come or heaven. Usually when Arendt refers to the world she means this world or the mundane world. (LSA 19)

As can be seen from the text quoted above, to be happy by loving the world would mean that the beloved (the world), has become a permanently inherent element of man's own being — a phenomena whose possibility she herself questions. How can man possibly possess the world? Can the gap that exists between man and the world actually be closed?

In response to the questions raised above, the answer she finds in reading Augustine seems to be found in loving the world and desiring it. In this way, the gap is bridged. What is important is the object of this love. If man loves the world for its own sake (*cupiditas*), then, according to Augustine<sup>48</sup>, he is worldly. Meaning that he transforms into a worldly being.<sup>49</sup>

Arendt defends this stand of man being worldly claiming that it is only logical that man desires the world because he forms part of it. In that sense, he is not free not to love it since he naturally forms part of it. “Love for the world, which makes it ‘worldly,’ rests on being “of the world” (*de mundi*) (LSA 66). A page later she says, “Only by making himself at home in the world does man establish the world as such.” (*ibid.*, 67)

For Arendt it is natural to love the world because man is already “of the world” (*ibid.*, 82) meaning that man is not responsible for the world's

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<sup>48</sup> “in *cupiditas* man wants not himself but the world, and in having the world he desires to become part and parcel of it. Originally, he is not part of the world, for if he were of the world, he would not desire it” (LSA 20).

<sup>49</sup> Fry also interprets Arendt's understanding of a worldly being in this way as can be seen in Hayden's book, *Hannah Arendt Key Concepts* (Fry, K. (2009). “Nativity”. In Hayden (Ed.), *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts* (pp. 23-35). London; New York: Routledge, 2014, pg. 25).

existence but rather, he already forms part of it and if anything as has been seen, he will die and leave it. Rather, what he can do, she advises, is to “make himself a lover of the world by turning it into ‘his own country’ (*patria*)” (ibid.) and thereby ‘making’ it his (more will be said about this shortly). This is one of the central dilemmas that the modern man faces as can be read in the Prologue of *The Human Condition (HC)*.

Originally, when writing her doctoral thesis, the concept of love she uses was mainly Augustine’s *caritas*. This could be explained and blamed on the ‘hermeneutical revival’ when Augustine was once again being revised in several universities and in the academic arena of that time. Heidegger himself was very interested in him at about this time.

Arendt, on the other hand, takes this a step further and soon develops this to the concept of ‘love of the world’ and in later years will do so even more to explain that this love is necessary. Her reasoning is that if there is care and concern for the world, then one is forced to act in accordance to this care as shall be seen in following subsection of this chapter. What is commendable here is how Arendt insistence on the *vita activa*<sup>50</sup> as opposed to leaving it on a merely contemplative level.

In later writings she will link this care of the world to education. Her outlook is that,

“Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. (...) education is the point at which we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel

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<sup>50</sup>A detailed explanation of this concept will be given in the second chapter.

them from our world (...) but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.”<sup>51</sup>

Basically, what she is saying is that education needs to be able to teach people to love the world. Thus, love of the world and for the other continues to be key in her political theory even after her years at university given that the above was written in 1958. The above quote is found in Section III of an article that she wrote entitled, “The Crisis in Education”<sup>52</sup> found in *Between Past and Future*. In it she goes on to explain that education is about the world and that it is also about life (BPF 196). Thereby again insisting on action when she claims in the quote above about the need to ‘prepare them in advance for the *task of renewing* a common world’ (ibid., emphasis added). Task of renewing implies action.

As of now, what has been seen is that to Arendt, man is naturally drawn to the world and that he desires it. It has also been seen that for man to be happy, he needs to possess the object that he craves for. More importantly, what comes up at this level is that much as men necessarily love the world, her insistence on action within the world as a consequence. It will be worth the while to begin by analysing her understanding of love in greater detail at this stage so that it is clearly understood what Arendt meant by ‘love of the world’.

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<sup>51</sup> Arendt, H., (1977) *Between Past and Future Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, (Enlarged). England: Penguin Books, pg. 196. This collection of exercises shall henceforth be abbreviated to BPF.

<sup>52</sup> For Arendt, “The problem of education in the modern world lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forgo either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition.” (BPF 195) What she basically says in this article is that there is a crisis in education in America because there is a crisis in authority which has generally been lost.

### 1.3.1 Formation of the concept of love

Part of man's actions as well as his way of loving the world consists of relating with others as they also form part of the world. These actions form a part of his quest for worldliness mentioned previously. "Since this world has always been constituted by men, it defines how men act toward each other." (LSA 93)

How men relate with each other is determined by love which is said to spring from *caritas*. (ibid.) In the same way, elsewhere she says, "The world consists of those who love it." (ibid., 66) Nevertheless, much as there is an obvious influence from Augustine, Arendt is not hesitant about differing from his views. One important marking factor is the fact that she refutes Augustine's explanation on how exactly men ought to love each other and who ought to be the recipient of this love.

According to Augustine, one must 'love one's neighbour as we love ourselves' (LSA 38, 93, 98). Arendt disagrees with Augustine's explanation of who one's neighbour is. Her interpretation of his explanation is that it is not the men in themselves who are loved, but rather "I love in him the being that lives in him as his source. (...) The same source is loved in each individual human being." (LSA 96) What and who is loved therefore goes much deeper than just the natural man. Thus, to her, it is the principle of being of man that is or ought to be loved given this explanation. All men have this principle or source. Arendt interprets this to mean that it is not the individual as such who is loved and that consequently, the individual himself means nothing (ibid., 97) since the individual is not the source. Thus, the individual is nothing without this source. Nevertheless, this does not affect the concept of love itself nor of *caritas* for that matter. Arendt's disagreement was merely

with the object of this love. Of relevance to this thesis is not the object but the concept itself.

Using a citation from her dissertation in which she says, “Love of neighbour leaves the lover himself in absolute isolation and the world remains a desert for man’s isolated existence” (ibid., 94). Allow me to explain, previously<sup>53</sup> it was seen that for a craving to end there must be inherent possession of the craved for object. Using the reasoning above, love of neighbour would mean inherence or possession of him. To her, since everyone turns out to be my neighbour this is impossible. Further, if we love<sup>54</sup> our neighbour ‘as God’, it “destroys every human standard” (ibid.) because “to love all people so completely without distinction means that the world becomes a desert to the lover” since “he does not love his neighbour for his neighbour’s sake but for his own sake” (LSA 95). This is where the isolation mentioned earlier comes in. We have seen that the object that is loved is not the individual. She explains,

“just as I do not love the self I made in belonging to the world, I also do not love my neighbour in the concrete and worldly encounter with him. Rather, I love him in his createdness. I love something in him, that is, the very thing which, of himself, he is not” (LSA 95).

The tragic thing here to Arendt is that we do not love our neighbour for what he is and that we actually ‘deny’ the other person so as to love ‘his real being’ (LSA 96). Here again I call attention to Arendt’s rather drastic separation of the source from the individual which ideally should not be. That ‘something’ in the neighbour also forms part and parcel of

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<sup>53</sup> Refer to the beginning of subsection 1.4.

<sup>54</sup> After her dissertation, I have not been able to find another ontological description of love in her writings before 1954.

the neighbour himself and his createdness, inseparably<sup>55</sup>. Only together can there be the individual himself for that matter.

She claims that there are two other things that also occur in the above-mentioned text; the human standard is destroyed and, the world becomes a desert<sup>56</sup> so to speak as the real presence of the others is denied<sup>57</sup>. It is this denial of the real presence of others that results in isolation mentioned above. Here yet again, by ‘real presence’ a separation of the soul from the individual is implied. This is why in her dissertation, where Augustine emphasises love of a supernatural world<sup>58</sup> and man, Arendt will instead emphasise love of the natural world. Barthold (2000)<sup>59</sup> gives a similar interpretation of this as do other writers like Kattago (2014)<sup>60</sup>. It is to this, our natural world, that man should strive to belong to and which, for her is necessary for man to be able to live a human life as well as a kind of *vita activa* as elaborated in *The Human Condition*. It should be noted that this does not mean that she advocates for a noncritical acceptance of the world as it is.

More on her understanding of the role of *caritas* can be seen in both volumes of her book *The Life of the Mind*. Nevertheless, at this stage, I

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<sup>55</sup> Aristotle claims that the organic body and soul are one and the same—the one as the possibility of life and the other as its actuality (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VIII, 1045b, 18-19).

<sup>56</sup> Arendt, H. (1996). *Love and Saint Augustine*, pg. 82, 84, 90, 91, 93, 94, 95, 112.

<sup>57</sup> This is important and it will be dealt with in greater detail when Arendt’s concept of superfluousness is analysed in the third chapter.

<sup>58</sup> In her dissertation, she notes that Augustine warns against ‘loving the world for its own sake’ because then ‘he loves the creation rather than the Creator’ (LSA 81). This is what happens when man clings to the world.

<sup>59</sup> Barthold, Lauren (2000), “Towards an ethics of love: Arendt on the will and St Augustine.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* vol:26/6 pg. 8.

<sup>60</sup> Kattago, S. “Hannah Arendt on the World”. In Hayden (Ed.), *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts* (2014). pgs. 52-54.

would like to emphasise that she acknowledges a link between *caritas*, love of neighbour, free will and conscience, and that her thesis generally revolves around these concepts and their relation.

### 1.3.2 Love of the world

At the beginning stage of her career, at the end of her dissertation, Arendt will conclude that man is unfree to love the world since he is naturally drawn to it. Her argument is that unlike God, who has an original link with the world, the product of his creation, man, “confronts his product as an outsider.” (LSA 67) Meaning that, “Man stands outside his product and has no intrinsic power over it.” (ibid.) If he did, then man would be free not to be drawn to it. But since he stands outside of it, this is not possible. Rather, she says, “Love of the world is never a choice, for the world is always there and it is natural to love it.” (ibid., 77)

She goes on to say that since man has no real power over the world, he is left with two choices. First would be to ‘withdraw from this world which, by inhabiting it, he made habitable’ (ibid., 67); or second, ‘appropriate the world through desire’(ibid.). By doing the latter, that is to say, by expressly loving the world, man ‘makes himself at home in the world’ even though he is still ‘outside’ of it (LSA 67). Regarding the

former option, it is what she accuses Heidegger of doing when he did not speak out against the Nazi regime<sup>61</sup>.

It is the second option that is of interest to this thesis and therefore a clear definition of the concept of world is needed. To begin with, it is true that man has no intrinsic power over the world and that he stands outside his product. Nevertheless, Arendt clarifies that the concept 'world' according to Augustine is a concept that is twofold; first, the world as 'God's creation' and second, it is 'the human world, which constitutes itself by habitation and love (*diligere*) (ibid., 66). She then goes on to explain that by loving the world, man brings it 'into being, but not out of nothing as in the case of creation' (ibid.) but from the pre-existing creation. It is to this effect that she will say, "Only by making himself at home in the world does man establish the world as such." (Ibid., 67). She goes on to explain that man the creature 'remains dependent on the world' (ibid.) and that when he establishes it, he makes it (ibid.). To be more precise, to explain the word making, she uses the Latin translation '*facere*' (ibid.). He 'establishes' the world and 'brings it into being' through his action.

This is distinct from Augustine's interpretation, by which she implies that sinners love the world, and by loving it, dwell in it and so make themselves part of it (ibid.). This distinction is Arendtian and already

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<sup>61</sup> She accuses him of withdrawing from the world like a fox. (EU 361). She accuses him of 'falling into line simply for the sake of (his job).' (ibid., 201) She also comments on this in her *Denktagebuch* 1953. Further lamentations can be found in the second footnote to the same article quoted here, entitled "Image of Hell" that was a review of *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime Against the Jewish People*, compiled and edited by several groups such as the *World Jewish Congress*, the *Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, the *Vaad Leumi*; and the *American Committee of Jewish Writers, Artists and Scientists* in 1946; as well as Weinreich, M. (1946). "Hitler's Professors", *Commentary*, 11/3.

brings out the relation between the world and action at this very early stage of her career. It is noteworthy that when she uses the term world, it is the human world that she refers to.

When Arendt says ‘for the world is always there’ she refers to the fact that man finds the world or is born into it<sup>62</sup> and he leaves the world when he dies. In other words, the world outlives man. She makes reference to this fact in several areas of her dissertation<sup>63</sup> and it is in accordance and consistent with what has been seen previously. It also continues to be consistent in her later writings. There, she will continue to take man as the main subject and central theme, and she will continue to describe love by taking man as a starting point.

An example of this consistency of taking man as a starting point is in a 1953 article where she will say, “The great metaphysical questions – (...) about man and world, being and nothingness, life and death – are always asked in solitude, when man is alone with himself and therefore potentially together with everybody.” (EU 359). In *The Human Condition*, she will explain the importance of the public realm, reserved for individuality, as a space in which each was more or less willing to share ‘in the burden of jurisdiction, defence, and administration of public affairs’ out of love for a body politic (HC 41). On page 51 (ibid.) she defines ‘love, in distinction from friendship’ as a private matter, to be illuminated in private and intimate lives, as something that is between men (HC 53) and is therefore worldless (HC 52-53). In all these citations above is shown how Arendt describes love and the world by always

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<sup>62</sup> According to Bowen-Moore, the theme of natality is situated “within the context of *amor mundi*” and that here we discover that “the worldly character of birth is tied to an attitude of love for the sake of the world.” (Bowen-Moore, P. (1989) *Hannah Arendt’s Philosophy of Natality*, pg. 20)

<sup>63</sup> Arendt, H. (1996). *Love and Saint Augustine*, pg. 55, 69, 70, 71, 77, 81.

beginning with man.

In later years, as shall be seen in the next chapter, she relates love to action, thereby developing her concept of love a step further. It is also at this stage in her writings of *The Human Condition* (1958) and in later writings, she relates love to forgiveness, claiming that it is only by love that one can forgive and thereby change the course of action<sup>64</sup>. She will also maintain that action is due to ‘the genuine experience of and love for the world’ (HC 344).

By now she describes the world as a place that is ‘much more determined by man acting into nature’ (BPF 59). She will also say that the world is more than just the ‘space for politics’ (EU 17) but ‘in a much larger sense, as the space in which things become public’ (EU 20). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (TOT), she will admit that “man is only the master, not the creator of the world” (TOT 302).

In her last work, *Life of the Mind*, she will describe the importance of the world as the space in which men appear. She will describe it as “the location for its (every living thing’s) own appearance, on fellow creatures to play with, and on spectators to acknowledge and recognise its existence.”<sup>65</sup> The relationship that she attributes to appearing and being is of fundamental interest and importance as shall consequently be shown in the third and fifth chapter.

It has been shown how Arendt’s understanding of the concept of love of the world has evolved. She begins by pointing out that it is natural for man to love the world, which leaves him no other option other than to

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<sup>64</sup> In consequent chapters, the concept of forgiveness in relation to action will be analysed in greater detail as a relevant part of this work.

<sup>65</sup> Arendt, H. (1978). *The Life of the Mind. II: Willing*, London: Secker & Warburg, pg. 22. Henceforth abbreviated to LMW.

love it. By loving the world, he ‘makes himself at home’ in it and thereby ‘brings it into being’ (LSA 67) thereby establishing himself in it. He does this by making (*facere*) mentioned previously. She brings up the fact that the world outlives man but sees man to have a role to play in the world, thereby taking man to be at the centre of it all – something that will not change in her later writings. Eventually, the world is seen as the space where man expresses himself and distinguishes himself. This constitutes the next task.

### 1.3.3 World and Appearance, but together

In the first part of her last work, *Life of the Mind I*,<sup>66</sup> Arendt will dedicate almost a quarter of her work to explain the importance of the concept of ‘appearance’. For her that which appears are the many things that are ‘natural and artificial, living and dead, transient and sempiternal’ (LMT 19). If they appear, she says, they do so to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled. This means that, there have to be ‘recipients of appearance’ ‘endowed with the appropriate sense organs’ who exist to perceive this appearance. These are the spectators (ibid). In other words, things that exist are perceived, that is why she consequently states that, “In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, *Being and Appearance coincide.*” (ibid.) Her argument here is that;

“Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*. In other words, nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is

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<sup>66</sup> Arendt, H. (1978). *The Life of the Mind. I: Thinking*, London: Secker & Warburg. This book will henceforth be abbreviated to LMT. The second part of this book is the prior mentioned one, *The Life of the Mind. II: Willing*.

is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality<sup>67</sup> is the law of the earth” (LMT 19)

If something exists, it does so to be seen by another with the appropriate faculties to perceive it – living beings. This necessarily implies two parties; the being that appears and the spectator. Not only do living beings perceive all things but they are also in themselves appearances (ibid.). She says they both see and are seen, hear and are heard, touch and are touched meaning that they are both object and subject (ibid.). “The worldliness of living things means that there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else, who guarantees its “objective” reality<sup>68</sup>.” (ibid.)

This implies the presence of another. If there is one, there is another and vice versa. That is why she says in the above cite that it is not just one man but men who inhabit this planet. This is the concept of plurality as seen and to which I shall come back shortly. Everything that is, is therefore perceived<sup>69</sup> or can be perceived by the many men who inhabit the earth.

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<sup>67</sup> I shall come back to this concept shortly and in great detail in the next subsection.

<sup>68</sup> In this she also refutes Descartes’ *Cogito me cogitare ergo sum* claiming that it “is a *non sequitur* for the simple reason that this *res cogitans* never appears at all unless its *cogitationes* are made manifest in sounding-out or written-down speech, which is already meant for and presupposes auditors and readers as its recipients” (LMT 20).

<sup>69</sup> According to Kateb, the advantage the spectator gets from what he perceives is not political in nature. He is also of the view that the advantages of pure politics are not political either (Kateb, G. “Political Action: It’s Nature and Advantages.” In Villa, D. R. (Ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Hannah Arendt* (pp. 130-148). Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pg. 144).

On a similar note, Young-Bruehl endorses that “Thinking may be ‘good for nothing’ in the world, but in the mind it is good for guidance—not legislation, but guidance.” (Young-Bruehl, E. (1982). “Reflections on Hannah Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*.” In Hinchmann, L., & Hinchmann, S. K. (Ed.). *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, pg. 361).

Soon after on page 21 of the same citation above, she brings out individual differences in perception saying that the appearances seem different to ‘each individual specimen’ for she speaks of appearance being perceived by a ‘plurality of spectators’ (LMT 21). This, as has been seen in earlier writings, is consistent with Arendt’s emphasis on the individual whenever she brings up the concept of plurality. To clarify this, it is well to point out that Arendt is against equalizing men as if they formed part of a mass of men. For her, men have no “uniform coherence” (TOT 235) and they cannot be equalized by circumstances as shall be seen, because then, she says, “no human dignity would be left” (TOT 235). In other words, individual men are different. That is why it is not surprising that she talks about seeming differences in appearance and the *dokei moi* (it-seems-to-me) mode of perceiving. See quotes below;

“Living things make their appearance like actors on a stage set for them. The stage is common to all who are alive, but it seems different to each species, different also to each individual specimen. Seeming—the it-seems-to-me, *dokei moi*—is the mode, perhaps the only possible one, in which an appearing world is acknowledged and perceived. To appear always means to seem to others, and this seeming varies according to the standpoint and the perspective of the spectators. (...) Seeming corresponds to the fact that every appearance, (...), is perceived by a plurality of spectators.” (LMT 21)

Above she implies that much as the spectators see the same things, it seems different to each one. It ‘varies according to the standpoint and the perspectives of the spectators’ meaning that there could be as many variations as standpoints and perspectives as there are spectators.

It is important to note that she does not claim that the thing in itself is different meaning that on an ontological level, this does not change but remains constant. She also points out that, “each individual life ... is a developmental process. (...) There are many perspectives in which this process can be seen, examined, and understood, but our criterion for what a living thing essentially is remains the same.”<sup>70</sup> (LMT 22)

For Arendt, the value of appearance turns out to be of greater interest as opposed to what one has on the inside (LMT 30). What is on the inside, to Arendt, is what appears in ‘self-display’. By this she means, when “I actively make my presence felt, seen and heard, or that I display my *self*, something inside me that otherwise would not appear at all.” (LMT 29-30) This is opposed to Portmann’s view, which she says, refers to this kind of self-display as an “inauthentic” appearance. For Arendt, “it is wrong to take into account only the functional process that goes on inside the living organism” (ibid.). The point is that, to make manifest the life of the mind, or what is on our inside – an idea, thought or emotion – we use conceptual language (LMT 30-31) which is speech, meant to be heard and understood by others<sup>71</sup> who also have the ability

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<sup>70</sup> One may argue that what appears may not be genuinely true of the specimen since men are able to choose how they wish to appear to others and how they choose to reveal themselves. This is true because of the element of freedom applicable only to man. Arendt identifies this as a specifically human quality (LMT 34) and deception can only be true ‘*up to a point*’ (ibid.) and are what are responsible for individuation. Since self-revelation is through speech and action, it is through them that we distinguish ourselves but still as humans since only men are capable of such distinction. (HC 178)

<sup>71</sup> Arendt also points out that not only do living beings perceive all things but that they are also in themselves appearances and that “there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else, who guarantees its ‘objective’ reality (LMT 19). This implies the presence of another and hence the condition of plurality which for Arendt is the law of the earth (ibid.).

to speak. Through metaphorical language, the inside is able to make an outward sensible appearance.

An important main factor that continually comes up in the preceding discussion, is the fact that the presence of others is of vital importance as a link to reality (HC xiii, 50, 58, 95, 199, 208) as it is to them that we appear. It is the concept that she later develops further as the concept of plurality.

In an article dated April of 1944, “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition” she writes;

‘For only within the framework of a people can a man live as a man among men (...). And only when a people lives and functions in consort with other peoples can it contribute to the establishment upon earth of a commonly conditioned and commonly controlled humanity.’ (JP 90)

This is how she places importance on the presence of others for ideal functioning of the individual and for humanity. This is her idea of authentic worldliness as shall be seen. The point here is that, the others also have a role to play for it is ‘within the framework of a people’ and not in isolation that men live and exist. She seems to imply that the presence of others results in proper development of the individual and consequently in some sort of harmony. The next task is therefore to analyse her concept of plurality.

#### 1.4 The concept of Plurality

As seen previously, men reveal themselves, through their actions, to others. The presence of others for Arendt implies an audience and for her, “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men, (...),

corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” (HC 7). The first time she actually uses the term plurality seems to be in *The Human Condition*<sup>72</sup>. There she states that it is “the *conditio sine qua non* as well as the *conditio per quam* of all political life.” (HC 7) This goes completely against what people was proposing in 1954, when they launched the first orbital flight and life not on earth seemed to become a fearful possibility. When Arendt wrote *The Human Condition*, these were the surrounding conditions at the time and she comments on them extensively in her Prologue. There she explains,

“What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. This, obviously, is a matter of thought, and thoughtlessness—the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of “truths” which have become trivial and empty—seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.” (HC 5)

Evident above are her concern for truth, the importance and role of surrounding or current conditions, the importance of thought, and action or what we are doing. However, since men were proposing an ‘escape’ out of the world, into space, then a whole different set of conditions

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<sup>72</sup> A search for the words ‘plurality’ and ‘pluralism’ was done on a digital version of the book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* which yielded no results. This book is a compilation of accumulated articles that she wrote between 1942 and 1958. In it, the word ‘individual’ features over 100 times and the word ‘person’ is used over 30 times. In *The Human Condition*, the word ‘person’ only appears about 45 times excluding use of the term in footnotes.

would be met. But for Arendt, as has been seen, plurality is a necessary factor for all political life. (HC 7)

Plurality is one of her principal ideas that is at the heart of her political theory that is recurrent and unchanging in all her writings right from the beginning. For a better understanding of it, a brief run through the historical development of the idea is in order.

In the early stages of her philosophical path and before the actual use of the term plurality, Arendt highlights the importance of the neighbour in *Love and Saint Augustine* which is related to *caritas* as was seen in a previous section. This is because she understands Augustine to mean that it is through the other that one is linked to one's neighbour (LSA 93). However, at this stage of her philosophical development, what is understood is also what Arendt maintains to the end of her doctoral dissertation and this is that to Augustine, the other 'is only an occasion to love God' (ibid., 96-97). For her it is not really the neighbour who is loved but love itself and that as a result, the individual is actually left in isolation (ibid., 97)<sup>73</sup>. This answers the question; What happens if there is no neighbour and one is in absolute isolation? (ibid., 95)

In *Love and Saint Augustine* we read, "The human race actually exists only in form of individual men." (LSA 60) Further, she describes Augustine's interpretations saying: "All particular things and individual organisms are embedded as parts in the other (*taxis*) of the whole, although their own constitution is entirely different from the constitution of the whole." (ibid., 64) This is one of the first manifestations of her idea of plurality as she will maintain, explain and understand it in later years. For instance, what she says years later in *The Human Condition* is completely in sync with this (HC 8, 175-176). As shall be shown, she

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<sup>73</sup> Refer to subsection 1.4.1 for her differentiation between solitude and isolation.

maintains that man, the individual is not alone, not in this world nor as an individual, that he needs others and that it is in presence of others that he manifests himself.

As was mentioned previously, the presence of others in whose presence man acts as an individual<sup>74</sup> is of vital importance.<sup>75</sup> There is the fact that all human beings belong to the same species and are sufficiently alike to understand one another. Arendt refers to this as equality (HC 175). The fact that no two individuals are ever interchangeable, since each of them is an individual endowed with a unique biography and perspective of the world is what she refers to as distinction (ibid.). We are individual and unique because ‘nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live’ as stated above. Even identical twins are distinct and separate individuals. Meaning that we each have a unique identity that is unrepeatable, each having a different combination of individual differences.<sup>76</sup> These are accidental differences predicated of the human

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<sup>74</sup> When Benhabib comments on Arendt’s individual losing his individuality with reference to a totalitarian system, she explains that if people are made to be superfluous and they are denied a public space within which they may act, “They are worldless in the sense that they have lost a stable space of reference, identity and expectation which they share with others.” (Benhabib, S. (1990). “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative.” In Hinchmann, L., & Hinchmann, S. K. (Ed.). *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (pgs. 111-142). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, pg. 117).

<sup>75</sup> At this stage, in her *Denktagebuch*, she clearly states that plurality begins where there are three. “Das Eins kennt als reines Lebendigsein weder Singular noch Plural. So wird aus dem Eins von Zwei der Ursprung des Dritten, und da fängt Pluralität erst an.” (Arendt, H. (2002). *Denktagebuch I: 1950 bis 1973*. Ludz, U., & Nordmann, I. (Eds.) München: Piper, Heft III, März 1951, [8] pg. 60).

<sup>76</sup> Other 20<sup>th</sup> Century thinkers have the same concern. For example, for Levinas it is ethics and not politics that recognises the singularity of the other (l’autrui). (Levinas, E., (1961). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Lingis, A., (Trans.) Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2012, pg. 39, 24)

being. It is through our speech and action that our unique distinctness is revealed. This in turn implies an audience and a spectator for that matter as has already been seen.

Originally, Arendt does not use the term plurality, at least not in her thesis. As already mentioned, the first time it comes up is in *The Human Condition*. Neither does it become a principal concern for her until later in the 1950s and 1960s. Rather, when Arendt talks about others in her dissertation, she implies a community<sup>77</sup> of ‘neighbours’ who are to be loved both for themselves and for the sake of their common source. There is as yet no separation of the world into the public sphere and the private sphere of which there is no mention as yet in her dissertation. It is more characteristic of Arendt in her later works such as in *The Human Condition* where she distinguishes between them for a better understanding of the world and reality as well as man and relations between men.

At this juncture, I would like to divert slightly to briefly explain Arendt’s separation of the world into private and public spheres before continuing with the concept of plurality. It is opportune because for her, “things and men form the environment for each of man’s activities” (HC 22) and a definition of the environment she is referring to needs to be understood.

At the beginning of her book *The Human Condition*, Arendt expounds Aristotle’s and the ancient Greek meaning of the private sphere to correspond to the household sphere. The head of the household ruled with an authority that was not contested. It was therefore justified to

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<sup>77</sup> Towards the end of her dissertation when describing the social life, she cautions against generalising men into communities. “The community (...) is understood as a body containing all individual members within itself.” (LSA 108)

command rather than to persuade and even to force people by violence. Thus, in the private sphere force and violence were justified as they were the only means during those times in Greece to master necessity.

In the public sphere on the other hand, you had the experience of the *polis* in which action and speech were fundamental<sup>78</sup>. To be political, or to live in a *polis*<sup>79</sup>, meant that decisions were made through words and persuasion<sup>80</sup>. It also meant the ability for one to express oneself and therefore distinguish oneself from the others who were just like him by forming part of the *polis* as heads of households. It is in this way that the individual was able to distinguish himself from the masses.

Following the Greek model, one could say that the distinction between public and private sphere, provides a frame similar to that which distinguishes between human condition and human nature. Arendt makes clear that the private sphere is not the public sphere, and that when she used the phrase human condition she did not mean what is understood as human nature. For her, human condition is not human nature. This is how she puts it:

“To avoid misunderstanding: the human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities

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<sup>78</sup> Action and speech and their role are fundamental in Arendt’s political thought and more shall be dedicated to this.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Pitkin interprets Arendt’s *polis* to have a twofold function for the Greeks in that it was supposed to multiply the chances for everyone to distinguish himself, and second, to make it more likely that greatness would be permanently remembered. (Pitkin, H.F. (1981) “Justice: On Relating the Private and the Public,” In *SAGE Publications*, pg. 270)

<sup>80</sup> Together, action and speech constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs (HC 95) and it is through them that individual differences are manifested and made apparent.

and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature. For neither those we discuss here nor those we leave out, (...) constitute essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them this existence would no longer be human.” (HC 9-10)

Now, plurality is a human condition (HC 7). Given the quotation above, plurality does not constitute essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without it, this existence would no longer be human. This would mean that even without plurality, a human being would still exist as a human. Now what Arendt explains is that, while all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics<sup>81</sup>, “plurality is specifically *the* condition (...) of all political life” (ibid.). This implies that without plurality there is no political life. She also describes it as follows: ‘Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anybody else who ever lived, lives, or will live.’ (HC 8)

Plurality thus refers both to *equality* and *distinction* and as opposed to the concept of man of the masses. Man of the masses is well explained in her chapter entitled “A Classless Society” in her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she describes how individuals were made to react as masses in the totalitarian regime.

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<sup>81</sup> Kiess is clear about Arendt’s love and concern of the world being much wider than imagined, “Clearly Arendt has concerns about limiting the role of politics to meeting our basic needs, but the circumstances that prompted her turn to worldliness indicate that she was hardly indifferent to them. It was the plight of the stateless—the abuse suffered by minority populations, the inability for refugees to find a home, the horrors of the concentration camps—that led her to emphasise the importance of worldly belonging.” (Kiess, J., (2016), *Hannah Arendt and Theology*, pg. 163. London, etc: Bloomsbury, pg. 122-123)

‘The term masses applies only where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organisation based on common interest, into political parties or municipal governments or professional organisations or trade unions. Potentially, they exist in every country and form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls. (TOT 311)

She also explains that, ‘Masses are not held together by a consciousness of common interest and they lack that specific class articulateness which is expressed in determined, limited, and obtainable goals.’ (ibid.) Much as they are together and are manipulated together, the masses have no substantial binding agent – no point of union. Instead, their weakness seems to lie in their numbers. This is how she puts it:

‘As opposed to the individual, totalitarian movements aim at and succeed in organising masses—not classes, not citizens with opinions about, and interests in the handling of public affairs. While all political groups depend upon proportionate strength, the totalitarian movements depend on the sheer force of numbers to such an extent that totalitarian regimes seem impossible, even under otherwise favourable circumstances, in countries with relatively small populations.’ (TOT 308)

The fact that there was no bond among the individuals who formed part of the masses is crucial since it resulted in an apolitical character that is contrary to the nature of man, who by nature is a political being. Arendt also draws attention to the fact that the masses are still made up of individuals and that their reactions are reactions of individuals. For example, she talks about ‘individual failure’ and ‘individual isolation’ (ibid., pg. 315) What this shows is that even though many people

together may form a mass of people, to Arendt these very masses are still made of individuals who are distinct from each other. She herself, uses the term ‘a mass of individuals’ (ibid., pg. 315). Neither does she deny that the totalitarian governments succeeded in forming mass attitudes, made up of the very individuals.<sup>82</sup> What one could say, is that for Arendt, plurality is a defence of the individual from the masses.

Otherwise, when it comes to the masses, the totalitarian movements, which she defined as ‘mass organisations of atomised, isolated individuals’ (ibid., pg. 323) claimed that ‘their most conspicuous external characteristic is their demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member.’(ibid.) Such loyalty, she says, can be expected only from ‘the completely isolated human being (...) without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances’ (ibid.). The loss of the individual self in the totalitarian regime was part of how the totalitarian system functioned. They aimed at and eventually succeeded in forming what is the European mass man (TOT 315)<sup>83</sup>, as Arendt named him. The mass man, nevertheless, is still an individual and though he be one among many, those many are all different and distinct from each other. In other words, as far as she is concerned, what the individual does is unique to him and is distinct from the masses or from what any other person could decide to do.

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<sup>82</sup> For example, she points out how; ‘highly differentiated individualism and sophistication did not prevent, indeed sometimes encouraged, the self-abandonment into the mass for which mass movements provided.’ (TOT 316)

<sup>83</sup> For more on this refer to the chapter on “A classless society” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

As was mentioned previously, the presence of others in whose presence man acts as an individual<sup>84</sup> is of vital importance.<sup>85</sup> There is the fact that all human beings belong to the same species and are sufficiently alike to understand one another. For Arendt this is possible because men are equal (HC 175) as has been seen. The fact that no two individuals are ever interchangeable, since each of them is an individual endowed with a unique biography and perspective of the world is what she refers to as distinction (ibid.). It is through our speech and action that our unique distinctness is revealed. This in turn implies an audience and a spectator for that matter as has already been seen.

Now to distinguish oneself is not to isolate oneself. Isolation, which Arendt differentiates from loneliness<sup>86</sup> and solitude, affects the political realm of life because one is denied the capacity to show that one is different from the others or that one is an individual. It is true that men need to feel that they form part of the world and that they belong to it. However, much as he needs to form part of it and be accepted by it, he also needs to be able to add to it as an individual by making his

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<sup>84</sup> When Benhabib comments on Arendt's individual losing his individuality with reference to a totalitarian system, she explains that if people are made to be superfluous and they are denied a public space within which they may act, "They are worldless in the sense that they have lost a stable space of reference, identity and expectation which they share with others" (Benhabib, S. (1990). "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative", pg. 117).

<sup>85</sup> At this stage, in her *Denktagebuch*, she clearly states that plurality begins where there are three. "Das Eins kennt als reines Lebendigsein weder Singular noch Plural. So wird aus dem Eins von Zwei der Ursprung des Dritten, und da fängt Pluralität erst an." (*Denktagebuch*, Heft III, März 1951, [8] pg. 60).

<sup>86</sup> According to her, loneliness affects human life as a whole as it is the loss of oneself. Solitude requires being alone but does not necessarily result in one losing contact with the world. One can be isolated without being lonely and solitude can result in loneliness. To be isolated is a situation in which one cannot act since no one else will act with you.

contribution which is unique and that only he can make. In order for this to happen, men need to be able to act in the public realm. In fact, she herself claims that, ‘Whether an act is performed in private or in public is by no means a matter of indifference.’ (HC 46)

Much as Arendt once again puts man in the centre, she does not excessively focus on the individual but highlights the importance of the others. In this I highly commend Arendt. In her understanding, she draws us back to the importance of the individual who in turn is who he is due the others<sup>87</sup>. She crowns off her dissertation on the last page by saying, “we can meet the other only because both of us belong to the human race.” (LSA 112)

Arendt’s thoughts on man being an individual and his relation with the others had an impact on her as can be seen from the fact that in her

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<sup>87</sup> This theorem is actually closely related to the “ubuntu theory” of South Africa which became widespread during Nelson Mandela’s presidency years later. This is how Michael Onyebuchi Eze summarises ubuntu:

“ ‘A person is a person through other people’ strikes an affirmation of one’s humanity through recognition of an ‘other’ in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the ‘other’ becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am. The ‘I am’ is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance.” (Eze, M.O., (2010) *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan US: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan)

This way of viewing man together with the others, of knowing that “I am because we are” is the natural African way of viewing people in society even if it has not been widely or officially formalised in writing. It is a way of life that the African has always known and has therefore always taken for granted.

future works, when Arendt referred to the beginning of the world or of men, she continued to make reference to Augustine, at times quoting him as an authority (TOT 479; HC 8, 10, 177; EU 321).<sup>88</sup>

Now, man distinguishes himself from his equals by his actions as well as speech which for Arendt (as for Aristotle) is also action (HC 25-26). Hannah Arendt links plurality, action and distinction. She says,

‘Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood.’ (HC 176)

Meaning, men distinguish<sup>89</sup> themselves through action because of the plurality of men. If there is action, it is because there is plurality and as

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<sup>88</sup> Of these, Augustine’s phrase: “*Initium ut esset, creatus est homo*” is one of her most frequently quoted ones. Arendt for example, develops her theory of action as a new beginning in history, based on this. Also based on this, springs her respect for man as a temporal being. She also makes continued reference to Augustine as her reference in other areas such as his *summum bonum* (EU 395).

<sup>89</sup> Arendt was of the view that neither Plato nor Aristotle considered this human condition to be as important as she would have liked. To them the fact that ‘man cannot live outside the company of men’ was common to both human and animal life and that it was a ‘limitation imposed on men by the needs of biological life’ (HC 24). In other words, for them, because of our biological needs, we live together and that this is also the case for animals. Since this was so for both animal and human life, to them, it was not a specifically human characteristic (ibid.). Arendt distinguishes men from animals with regard to action. For her, action is fundamentally human which she distinguishes from labour which, for her, is what animals also do. She says; “Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it.” (HC 22-23)

long as there is action, there is distinction through the very action. She believes this to such an extent that she says that without these (speech and action), one ceases to live a human life as one no longer lives among equals (HC 176)<sup>90</sup>. Instead, speech and action reveal the human unique distinctness.

‘they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human. This is true of no other activity in the *vita activa*.’ (HC 176)

In the text above, Arendt uses the term ‘refrain’ implying that, if this want of initiative is involuntary, say for example if someone lacked the necessary faculties for either speech or action, then they would still be human without these ways of self-distinction. A dumb man or a crippled man would be unable of either speech or action respectively but it would not be for want of initiative and therefore they would still be human. Such physically impaired persons usually find a means by which they are able to communicate and to make themselves understood. I would say that it would still be valid for her to say that ‘Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness’ because then they would be revealing themselves in a manner that is even more unique. Also, important to note is the fact that she uses the term ‘reveal’ thereby implying that it is not the action itself that gives the distinction. In other words, all humans, even disabled humans live the *vita activa*. By his actions, man adds a

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<sup>90</sup> Benhabib points out that “Although action is a central category in Arendt’s thought, without being placed in its proper context alongside natality and plurality, emphasis on it alone yields a truncated access to her thought”. (Benhabib, (1996) *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Thousand Oaks etc.: SAGE Publications.pg. 197)

newness to the world that is specific to the agent, and by which he distinguishes himself from his peers. Arendt refers to this as *natality* (HC 8-9).

### 1.5 The concept of *Natality*

By *natality*, Arendt refers to a newness brought about or added to society with the birth of each individual. This new story or newness that man brings with himself at his birth is the same that she later refers to as *natality* in *The Human Condition* (HC 8-9) and again in her last work *Life of the Mind Willing* (LMW 217). This concept is already present in her doctoral thesis. For example, she quotes from Augustine's text on God's creation of man, *The City of God*, saying; 'that a beginning be made man was created'<sup>91</sup>. This beginning, she will say again in later years, "is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man" (TOT 479). In later years she will quote Augustine's original text "*Initium ut esset, creates est homo, ante quem nemo fuit*" (BPF 167). Arendt often recited and or quoted this text in Latin from Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* (XII, 20) when referring to this concept.<sup>92</sup>

In *Love and Saint Augustine* she refers to the concept of beginning as such and not as *natality* as was the case in later years when she had further developed this concept. As a matter of fact, she only used this term once in this work where she says; "The decisive fact determining man as a conscious, remembering being is birth or 'natality,' that is, the fact that we have entered the world through birth." (LSA 51) It is said that she added this paragraph to her 1960 edition of this work because it

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<sup>91</sup> She quotes from Book 12, chapter 20.

<sup>92</sup> See also Arendt TOT 212-13, 215; HC 177; LMW 108-10.

is absent from her original dissertation. It has been suggested that it is very likely that the use of this term was incorporated into her dissertation research from her other political writings when she herself revised it before publication<sup>93</sup>. Kampowski interprets Arendt to have wanted to emphasise the importance of natality when she revised the edition of her dissertation and inserted the chapter on natality.<sup>94</sup>

Much as the term is not used elsewhere in this dissertation, the meaning and sense of the concept natality or newness through birth is evident and remains constant throughout all her later work<sup>95</sup>. In *Love and Saint Augustine* we have a description of the importance of birth and her interpretation (LSA 54-55). Basically, she continues to maintain that man's existence is continually changing in the sense that when his life begins, it simultaneously also starts to end or to approach death.

Arendt holds that each person is different and unique and that, what they as individuals have to offer the world, is also unique. She does not cut anyone off and is of the view that the others are necessary for this newness and beginning. Newness through birth or natality is thus closely linked to action. Fry is of the same view of this interpretation saying that for Arendt, "Action is grounded in natality, but it also relates to the

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<sup>93</sup> Explained in the preface of *Love and Saint Augustine* (LSA xiv) and in Fry, K. text entitled "Natality". (Fry, K. (2009) "Natality". In Hayden (Ed.), *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts* (pgs. 23-35). London; New York: Routledge, 2014.)

<sup>94</sup> Kampowski, S. (2008). *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: the action theory and moral thought of Hannah Arendt in the light of her dissertation on St. Augustine*. Cambridge, U.K.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., pg. 207-209.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Bowen-Moore holds that Arendt describes three human experiences when she uses the term natality, factual natality – birth into the world; political natality – birth into the realm of action; and theoretical natality – birth into the timelessness of thought. (Bowen-Moore, P. (1989) *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality*, New York: St. Martin's Press)

human condition of plurality.”<sup>96</sup> Arendt defines action<sup>97</sup> saying, “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter” (HC 7). Meaning first, that action goes on between men implying the presence of others, and second, that it does not require the presence of intermediary things for it to happen.

The fact that action is linked to others highlights that it (action) is linked to the human condition of plurality, which was defined above in a previous section (ibid., 7, 22). There it was seen that it is in the world where things happen and the world is where men distinguish themselves from their equals through their actions. Since action is always in the society of men then it is political in nature as Arendt herself implies (HC 198).

Birth into the world corresponds to appearance as described previously in Sub-section 1.3.3. It is also the initiative mentioned in the prior subsection (HC 176), from which one cannot refrain and still be human. In other words, the individual must take the initiative himself meaning that he is also the originator of the act. As originator of an act, one is also responsible for the act. Action is in turn stimulated but is not conditioned by the presence of others. Earlier on in *The Human Condition* she will have claimed that, ‘it is only action that is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others’ (HC 22-23). The factor that she brings up here is that action is based upon appearance since it requires the presence of others.

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<sup>96</sup> Fry, K. (2014), “Nativity”, in *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, Hayden, P. (Ed.) pg. 30.

<sup>97</sup> On a different level, Arendt goes to both the Greek and Latin translations to designate the verb “to act.” She refers to the two Greek verbs; *archein* (meaning to begin, to lead) and *prattein* (meaning to achieve or to finish). In Latin these correspond to the verbs *agere* (meaning to set into motion, to lead) and *gerere* (whose original meaning is to bear) For more on this refer to *The Human Condition*, pg. 189.

If one is the initiator of an act, then for her, action is the capacity to be able to add *something of one's own* to the common world (ibid., 9). Since we are unique beings, only we can add what we add to the common world and we add it as ourselves – individually. This is always new. What I do, no one else will nor can do as I do. In the same way, it is myself that is disclosed when I act and not anyone else. An individual is not disclosed by the actions of another. Personal contribution is therefore not only new but also unique to the individual.

For Arendt, every individual has something new to offer to society. I would not exclude the physically handicapped as an acting individual since what they themselves add is also something new. This implies that natality also applies to them. If anything, Arendt claims that natality is *inherent* in all human activities. She says, ‘the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities.’ (HC 9) If it is inherent, then the physical ability of the ‘newcomer’ is irrelevant. Raising natality to an inherent<sup>98</sup> level would mean that it is natural to man and therefore also forms part of his being.

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<sup>98</sup> In her article, “What is Existential Philosophy”, she mentions Kant’s ideas in relation to inherent laws. She claims that, ‘He is the first philosopher to attempt to understand man entirely within the context of laws inherent in man and to separate him out from the universal context of Being in which he is only one thing among others.’ (EU 170)

Again, if it is inherent in man, then man is subject to it<sup>99</sup>. With regard to natality, therefore, if it is inherent then *all* new comers into the world bring something new with them and since each one is different and unique, what they as individuals have to offer the world is also unique. Thereby meaning that, each individual, regardless of his physical abilities or disabilities, adds something new to the world with his acts. Labour as well as work, apart from action, “are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide for and preserve the world” (HC 9). This is closely related to what Arendt says in *Love and Saint Augustine* regarding action in the world where she comments that man ‘establishes’ the world and ‘brings it into being’ through his action (LSA 67).

Arendt also claims that action has the outstanding character of “inherent unpredictability” (HC 191). In other words, “This is not simply a question of inability to foretell all the logical consequences of a particular act (...) but (...) which (...) begins and establishes itself as soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past.” (HC 191-192) Action and consequently natality are therefore unpredictable but inherently so. Not even the actor can be fully aware of the full consequences of his actions. A more detailed discussion on the unpredictability of action will follow in the next chapter. As for now, it suffices to note that the effects of action are diverse and unlimited, capable of having far reaching effects and that action as a group can prove to be a challenge since each

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<sup>99</sup> One might wonder; if natality is inherent, is there any freedom in the acting being? I shall not proceed to answer this question but I will give Arendt’s view on Kant with regard to freedom and action: ‘For Kant, man has the possibility, based in the freedom of his good will, to determine his own actions; the actions themselves, however, are subject to nature’s law of causality’ (EU 171).

She does not dispute this view and so one can assume that she is in agreement. Meaning, man determines his own actions and that the actions are based in the freedom of his good will.

new birth comes with potentially new ideas as does each new generation. Arendt is of the view that “much as these actions are within the realm of human affairs, there can never be a framework that can reliably withstand the onslaught with which each new generation must insert itself” (HC 191).

In the same line, Arendt talks about the fact that action is irreversible. This is because a reaction in response to action is in itself a new action and so on in a circular and ongoing way (HC 190). A ‘reaction strikes out on its own and affects others’ (ibid.). That is why in *The Human Condition*, she actually talks about so called dangers in our actions. For one, she says that action is something that is boundless in political action as well as otherwise (ibid.). What she says is that; “Thus action and reaction never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners (...) the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation” (ibid.) hence its boundlessness. This too will be covered in greater detail in the next chapter.

Basically, there is no formula that one may follow and no existing blueprint of what must be done since action in itself is ‘inherently unpredictable’. That is why, she says, an electronic computer cannot foretell the future (HC 191). Logical consequences of a particular act cannot be foretold because of natality because of its unpredictability. One cannot foretell the future and neither can one predict it. Instead, she advocates for the ‘political virtue of moderation,’ of ‘keeping within bounds’, and ‘not the will to power, as one may be inclined to believe’. (HC 190) None of these fully arrest its boundless character. Only to the extent that territorial boundaries help to protect and make possible the physical identity of a people, while laws protect and make possible their

political existence (ibid.). However, since “natality is quite independent of the frailty of human nature” (HC 191), these boundaries are altogether helpless against its inherent unpredictability.<sup>100</sup>

The other factor that came up above was that through action, men make themselves understood. This is as a consequence of action being a distinguishing factor. Gottsegen has this to comment,

“It would be a mistake to imagine, however, that the actor who stands before his peers is like some object that can be known all at once. In reality, this self-revelatory process unfolds in time and what the citizen reveals is a self that is always revealed in a life to the degree that it is a public life. It is not however, a self that is merely unfolded before the spectators who record its self-related and self-determined contours.”<sup>101</sup>

According to Gottsegen, “The unpredictability of the first actor is matched by the unpredictability of the rest. Each in his spontaneity and uniqueness is capable of doing the unexpected and in doing so begins series of actions and reactions all along the web whose consequences are such as none can predict.”<sup>102</sup> One can never really know what the effect of an action will be and how it will affect another. Neither can one know the full impact of an action until it has been ended.

All in all, in this chapter it has been possible to inquire into Arendt’s ethics and its supposed foundation and link to existentialist ideas as well as the need for essence and existence to coincide. It has been seen how her ideas such as plurality and natality are not far removed from the

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<sup>100</sup> A more detailed discussion of actions’ inherent predictability is given in subsection 2.3.2.

<sup>101</sup> Gottsegen, M.G., (1994) *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, Albany, pg. 28.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

teachings of Socrates, Aristotle and Augustine. Starting with them, an in-depth analysis of her main anthropological and ethical categories as opposed to traditional philosophical methods was done. What has stood out strongly is her love and concern for the world. The way humans act, demonstrates their concern for the world. The dangers of action, mentioned above, point to the fact that action can lead to both good and evil. Gottsegen affirms this when he says, “Thus, the action that ought to sustain the public space might instead ruin it.”<sup>103</sup> This action, freely performed in the public space is political action. Arendt goes on to conceive man as an acting political being capable of ruining the world that she is so concerned about and that she loves.

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<sup>103</sup> Gottsegen, M.G., (1994) *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, pg. 59.



## Chapter 2: Political Action

The excellence of politics as human action is something that Arendt elevated to such an extent that others have been forced to rethink and question its true essence. If the human condition indeed requires plurality and natality, it would follow that Arendt's ideas are accorded a central role in politics. One of the ways in which she managed to reawaken the desire for its deeper understanding is described in her book, *The Human Condition*, where she gives a clear definition of action as differentiated from labour and work.<sup>104</sup> All three for her, are what constitute the *vita activa*, meaning the fundamental conditions under which life on earth has been given to man (HC 7). She then relates all three of them to politics but it is only action<sup>105</sup> that goes on directly between men and which consequently requires the presence and society

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<sup>104</sup> Delacampagne, in his work on philosophical history in the twentieth century, claims that after WWII, very few philosophers have tried to understand how Auschwitz became a reality. He names Arendt and Karl Jaspers writings to be among the most important ones. (Delacampagne, C., (1995) *Historia en la filosofía en el siglo XX*, DelaMayos, G. (Trans.), Barcelona: Ediciones Península pg. 209) He also claims that her work is based on solid historical documentation (ibid. 214).

Fine also praises her courage and skill in offering a “worldly” perspective of the holocaust or rapture with civilization. (Fine, R. “Understanding Evil Arendt and the Final Solution.” In Pía, L. M., (Ed.) *Rethinking Evil* (2001). London, pg. 131.

<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, she still holds that all three are necessary and that all three are needed together.

of other men (HC 22). Thus, as a result of its condition of plurality, Arendt links action to politics.

For Arendt, plurality, as was seen in Chapter 1, is both the *conditio per quam* as well as the *conditio sine qua non* of all political life (HC 7). This, as was seen, also applies to natality since both of them are inherent of action. Their inherence accords them with an ontological quality given that it is the way to become human as well as the way to *be* human. Arendt herself holds them to be such as was explained in the first chapter and as will be evident throughout this work. In this chapter, I shall discuss Arendt's political action as well as the implications that this brings with it. It stems from the fact that man is a political being who acts, whose actions can be moderated, as well as the implications of his actions in relation to his existential human condition. First, however, a brief history provided by Arendt of the notion of man as a political being is necessary.

## 2.1 Man as *bios politikos*

When Hannah Arendt tries to understand a concept, it is typical of her to go back to earlier times or to antiquity in order to trace the origin of its use. In this case, she goes back to Aristotle. She explains that he described one way of life which was 'devoted to the matters of the *polis*, in which excellence produces beautiful deeds' (HC 13). These deeds or actions refer to man's action as a political being. To elaborate this a bit further, it is well to remember that men were seen as acting political beings and that their action is necessarily in the presence of others and so puts human action (*praxis*) with reference to politics, on a pedestal way above the other human conditions. At a conference in Toronto held in November of 1972, Arendt said, "Real political action comes out as a

group act.”<sup>106</sup> She also claims that, ‘action is the political activity par excellence’ (HC 9) because action, rooted in natality, has the task to provide for and preserve the world (ibid.). This is similar to what was seen in *Love and Saint Augustine*, where Arendt first mentions that man establishes himself in the world with his action (LSA 67). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the moment I act politically, I’m concerned with the world<sup>107</sup> and the others form part of this world.

It is the ‘real political action’ of men, mentioned above, which comes out as a ‘group act’ that Arendt referred to as the *vita activa*. She describes it saying that the term *vita activa*, comprehending ‘all human activities’ (HC 15) corresponds more closely to the Greek *askholia* (unquiet) (ibid.). When Arendt explains the term *vita activa*, she holds that its original meaning was translated from Aristotelian *bios politikos*<sup>108</sup>. This term again occurs in medieval philosophy in Augustine<sup>109</sup> (HC 12) For her, its original meaning (*bios politikos*) ought to refer to ‘a life devoted to public-political matters’ which Augustine denotes as *vita negotiosa* or *actuosa* (ibid.). *Bios politikos* and *vita activa* are therefore closely linked.

In order for one to preserve the original meaning of either term, she goes on to explain that, “The chief difference between the Aristotelian and the later medieval use of the term is that the *bios politikos* denoted explicitly only the realm of human affairs, stressing the action, *praxis*, needed to establish and sustain it.” (HC 13)

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<sup>106</sup> Arendt, H., (1972). “On Hannah Arendt,” In Hill, M.A., (Ed.) *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, (pp. 301-339). St. Martin’s Press, New York, pg. 311.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> The use of this term was later brought up again by Foucault in his book in the 1970s after Hannah Arendt had already made use of this term.

<sup>109</sup> In her doctoral thesis she quotes her reference as: Augustine *De Civitate Dei* xix. 2, 19.

The notion of the use of this term later changed from referring explicitly only to the realm of human affairs, to include all human activities ‘defined from the viewpoint of the absolute quiet of contemplation’ (HC 15). This meant that action – *vita activa* – later included anything and everything except for absolute quiet contemplation. It included private affairs which were dragged to the public realm. Originally, this should never have been the case and therefore the transformation of the understanding of the term was misleading as can be seen from her lamentation below,

“With the disappearance of the ancient city-state – Augustine seems to have been the last to know at least what it once meant to be a citizen – the term *vita activa* lost its specifically political meaning and denoted all kinds of active engagement in the things of this world.” (HC 14)

When it was thus disoriented, the *vita contemplativa* took precedence in importance over the *vita activa* yet it should not have been so. The change in meaning of the term and the reversal of importance, is something that she claims can already be found in Plato’s political philosophy<sup>110</sup> (HC 14).

To some degree, Arendt also blamed the advent of Christianity which seemingly advocated the contemplative life over and as opposed to action (HC 14-16). In that sense, she says Christianity abased the *vita activa* (HC 16) thereby putting it on a lower pedestal as compared to contemplative life. It needs to be clarified that she is not opposed to the contemplative life, herself being a thinker. She clearly states that, “my

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<sup>110</sup> Her explanation for this is that this was to make the philosopher’s way of life possible. The intention therefore was to advocate for contemplation or to market it so to speak in modern terms since a philosopher’s way of life was more contemplative than active and to market it thus would help to make it more attractive.

use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*.” (Ibid. 17) It further ought to be mentioned that Christianity gave the *vita contemplativa* a new kind of dignity when it came to private affairs.

Nevertheless, of interest to this section is the life of man as a *bios politikos* in which of all his activities, action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*) were what classically rendered him as a political being (ibid. 25). These two must always go together as they were considered coeval and coequal, of the same rank and the same kind meaning that most political actions are transacted in words and that the correct use of them (the words), is indeed action (ibid. 26). In this work, speech is also considered to be action unless otherwise stated.

Above is the classical description of political action as it was originally in antiquity according to Plato and Aristotle, and as interpreted by Arendt. It is therefore of interest and probably necessary to analyse political action in and of itself. To begin with, Arendt claimed that the ‘the original Greek understanding of politics had been lost’ (Ibid. 23). To her, authentic or ‘real politics’ was ‘as in antiquity’<sup>111</sup>. Therefore, politics as in antiquity is different from traditional theory politics. This is a point of contention that has been discussed over the years and to date.

One of her contesters is Draenos, who explains that Arendt critiques traditional theory as ‘part and parcel of her effort to preserve the

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<sup>111</sup> She said this at a conference held in November 1972 on *The Work of Hannah Arendt* organised by the Toronto Society for the Study of Social and Political Thought. She demonstrated this when, having been invited to attend the conference as the guest of honour, she preferred to be invited to participate. This is very consistent with what she held to be good use of the public realm. To dialogue with ones’ equals. A transcript can be found in the book, *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*. (Arendt, H. (1972). “On Hannah Arendt”, pg. 330)

meaning of the past outside the framework of tradition' and in order to 'defend the dignity of the political realm'<sup>112</sup>. Pitkin points out how Arendt saw the public sphere as traditionally constituted to have been deformed and denatured, saying that action, once the very marrow of politics, has become not only rare but elusive and difficult to recognise for what it is<sup>113</sup>. In more recent times, Arendt held that for Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Bergson, worldliness of action has lost its meaning or has at least been radically transfigured such that what they refer to ultimately in their writings, is not politics, action or plurality (HC 17). According to Arendt, when man acts in public, through politics, he ought to be capable of attaining a greatness as well as a place of individual excellence proper to man (HC 49). This is what authentic political action is about. As interpreted by Pitkin (1981), it ought to be 'the possibility of a shared, collective, deliberate, active intervention in our fate'<sup>114</sup>. Active intervention also implies continued new reactions that are unpredictable and go on *ad infinitum* unless interrupted.

For a deeper understanding of Arendt's concept of authentic political action, we shall explore the nature of this political excellence. Arendt gives an in-depth description in *The Human Condition* having written about it previously though less in her book *Between Past and Future*. She specifically addresses this issue in her article entitled "What is Authority?" (BPF 91, 102-104, 141). Here I shall give a reduced description for the purpose of this thesis. Therefore, the next task, is to delve into what Arendt considered to be the first and principle necessary 'human condition' for any and all political action. According to her, it

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<sup>112</sup> Draenos, S.S. "Thinking without a Ground: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Situation of Understanding". In Hill, M.A., (Ed.) *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, (pp. 209-224). St. Martin's Press, New York, pg. 220.

<sup>113</sup> Pitkin, H.F. (1981) "Justice: On Relating Private and Public", pg. 257.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 279.

stems from concern and love of the world as was explained in the first chapter.

## 2.2 Concern about the world

In the same conference mentioned earlier in footnote 4, Arendt says that, ‘The moment I act politically I’m not concerned with me, but with the world.’<sup>115</sup> In other words, authentic political action results in concern about the world. She goes on to admire how Rosa Luxemburg and Machiavelli both had a greater concern for the world than for themselves. To be concerned about the world implies care and interest for the best. Of interest are the existential qualities, non-ontological in nature, that Arendt rates as highly as the ontological ones. Since man is a *bios politicos*, it is of vital importance to place him in context which for Arendt would be principally in the public space.

In the previous chapter, love for the world was described at length with a bias to ontological characteristics. It shall now be tackled principally from the point of view which Arendt considers to be of significant importance in political action—the *polis*.

### 2.2.1 The *polis*

As seen before, Arendt’s descriptions of man as a political being are based on ancient Greek politics<sup>116</sup> (HC 58-59, 192-198) therefore her starting point for classical political philosophy is centred in the political arena in Athens. In order to classify the political arena, in ancient

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<sup>115</sup> Arendt, H. (1972). “On Hannah Arendt”, pg. 311.

<sup>116</sup> In *On Revolution* (Arendt, H. (1963). *On revolution*. New York: Viking Press, 1965. Henceforth abbreviated to OR) one can read, “The two famous definitions of man by Aristotle, that he is a political being and a being endowed with speech, supplement each other and both refer to the same experience in Greek polis life.” (OR 9).

Greece, there was a clear distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere. To Arendt, the Greeks clearly defined each of these spheres:

“The distinction between a private and public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms<sup>117</sup>, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state” (HC 28).

In her description<sup>118</sup>, the private sphere corresponds to the private or household realm with the head of the household ruling with an authority that was not contested as was briefly outlined in subsection 1.4. Roles were well defined and well known. When a man owned a house<sup>119</sup> he had a place where he could exercise supreme authority. There he had no need to excel or to outshine anyone.

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<sup>117</sup> A more direct translation of the word Arendt used in German *Bereich*, would not ideally translate to realm but space. Since the English use of the word space is much broader, for the purpose of this thesis, I shall prefer to use the word realm or sphere depending on, and in relation to how Arendt used either term in her writings.

<sup>118</sup> Refer to Chapter 2 of *The Human Condition* for a detailed description of the private sphere. For this work, a brief description will suffice.

<sup>119</sup> One might wonder what Arendt would have said with regard to people who do not have private property. Would they not be considered as human or capable of realising their human capacities? In relation to those who were deprived of ownership of property as such, for example slaves, she quotes Plinius Junior to say that, ‘the house of the master was what the *res publica* was to citizens.’ (HC 59). Meaning that even the slaves had their “own” place where they could be themselves - slaves. This does not necessarily mean that they fully human in the sense that they were free for she says on page 64 that, ‘to have no place of one’s own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human’ and definitely not to be free. Also, to own property meant that one was master over one’s own necessities of life and that one was therefore free to transcend his own life and enter the world all have in common. (HC 65) It was in the common world that private ownership acquired its political significance. Slaves are servants of necessity against their own will so they are not free for public activity let alone private activity.

Distinction and difference were matters reserved for the public realm which was where one strived to be able to shine among equals<sup>120</sup>. The term ‘public’ signified everything that appears in public, can be seen and heard by everybody, and has the widest possible publicity. The Latin root of ‘public’ is *publicus* meaning of the people; of the state; done for the state. In Old Latin, its etymological root is from *poplicus* pertaining to the people (*populus*). For Arendt, therefore, the *polis* or the public realm signifies the people. This realm was also the realm of freedom<sup>121</sup>. One had the experience of the *polis* in which action and speech were fundamental for one to be able to stand out.

“Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the *bios politicos*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*), out of which rises the realm of human affairs (...) from which everything merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded.” (HC 25)

To be political, is to live in a *polis* and it meant that decisions were made through words and persuasion and never through violence or force. As cited above, Aristotle considered both *praxis* and *lexis* to be necessary for public life. They are fundamental because it is through our action and speech that our unique distinctness is revealed<sup>122</sup>. Together, action and speech constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs (HC 95) and it is through them that individual differences are manifested and

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<sup>120</sup> Equals in the sense that all of them came from and had their own private or household realm. “The polis was distinguished from the household in that it knew only “equals”, whereas the household was the centre of the strictest inequality. (HC 32)

<sup>121</sup> Freedom itself is an aspect that Arendt considered vital for the human condition and will be discussed at length.

<sup>122</sup> Byarugaba, J. K. (2016). “Reflexivity between the Modern Society Concepts of Equality and Plurality: Their Transformation according to Arendt.” In *Philosophy Study*, April 2016, Vol. 6, No. 4, 199-203, pg. 199.

made apparent. How they act, is a manifestation of their concern for the world. More explicit explanations of this will be given in subsequent chapters regarding action and freedom, as well as morality of action.

To make relevant decisions in the prescribed place can only be done if there is genuine concern for addressed issues and consequently for the *polis* and therefore for society, which in turn is concern for the world. Much as Arendt does not explicitly discern nor describe this, logically, such norms can only be lived if there is due respect held for the two different spheres.

### 2.2.2 Public and private sphere

Arendt is of the view that in modern times, the distinction between the public and private spheres is no longer clear due to what she calls ‘the rise of the social’ and an ‘unconscious substitution of the social for the political’ (HC 23, 27). In ancient times, going back to Plato, she claims that there was a ‘profound misunderstanding’ that started when the Latin translation of “political” was expressed as or said to be “social” (HC 27). The consequent use of the term social instead of political as was erroneously done, was fatally misleading and only got worse the more the erroneous translation was used.

According to Arendt the social realm is neither the private nor the public sphere<sup>123</sup> (HC 28) but is something quite different. She says the social<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> In *The Human Condition* she uses the terms sphere and realm seemingly interchangeably.

realm arose when household matters such as ‘housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organisational devices’ were openly discussed in the public sphere (HC 38). For her, the ancients considered this content to be private matter that ought not be exposed in public (ibid.). Once the private started being openly discussed, the clear distinction between the public and private spheres became blurred (ibid.)<sup>125</sup>. With the rise of society, all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family became a “collective” concern. In other words, private affairs were no longer a matter exclusively for the household. Instead, it became more common to have people from the public sphere interfering with issues that are ideally a concern in the private sphere. “In the modern world, the social and the political realms are much less distinct.” (ibid., 33) “In the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself.” (ibid.)

When the two spheres are no longer respected, nor clearly defined, as has just been demonstrated above, there, results a break in relations, lack of respect of the private sphere. The private is no longer private and the

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<sup>124</sup> She describes the social realm by making reference to the public realm, “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (...) The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.” (HC 35-53) From this quotation, mass society is a group of people who are not bound together or is a world that is not shared among people as is the public realm (Fry, K. (2014), “Nativity”, pg. 59).

<sup>125</sup> She makes this clear by describing how Rousseau described how the modern man had issues regarding intimacy claiming that the modern individual was unable “either to be at home in society or to live outside it altogether” (HC 39).

authority enjoyed and exercised in the public realm becomes meaningless. Arendt actually goes so far as to claim that (modern) mass society<sup>126</sup> destroys both the public and private realm. This she says because mass society,

“deprives men not only of their place in the world but of their private home, where they once felt sheltered against the world and where, at any rate, even those excluded from the world could find a substitute in the warmth of the hearth and the limited reality of family life.” (HC 59)

For her, both the public and private realms are threatened by the social and yet both realms are essential. We need a private realm because we cannot always live as a spectacle of and in the public. She also mentions the fact that private concerns are also relevant and that there are some ‘matters which can only survive in the realm of the private’ (HC 51). One such example is love, in distinction from friendship, which she claims is killed the moment it is displayed in public. She also talks about the good which loses its quality of goodness once made public<sup>127</sup>.

Rather, it is in the public realm

“where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that

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<sup>126</sup> By mass society she means where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbour. In both instances, men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. The end of the common world has come, she says, when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective. (HC 33)

<sup>127</sup> In a later chapter a closer look will be taken at what she means by good and goodness and the morality of action.

he was the best of all. (...) The public realm (...) was reserved for individuality; it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were.” (HC 33)

This is therefore what the public space does and what men have seemingly been deprived of. There, men were made men, one could say. Their individuality was made manifest. There men were able to highlight what made them different from their otherwise equals. This is what the public space did for the individual. This space was respected meaning there was concern for what went on in it.

In Greek antiquity, she claims, it was understood that: “A man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human.” (HC 38) In other words, both spheres were necessary in order for one to be truly human, and both spheres, in her opinion, ought to be well defined and respected in order for them to fulfil their intended functions. This comes from true concern and love for the world. Arendt herself says, “it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the polis.” (HC 30-31)

The public space provided the space or formed the *polis*. It is thus the space where men met as equals both those who acted, listened, spoke and those who were spectators. She describes the *polis* at the very end of her book, *On Revolution*,

“let us know through the mouth of Theseus, the legendary founder of Athens and hence her spokesman, what it was that enabled ordinary men, young and old, to bear life’s burden: it was the polis, the space of men’s free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendour—τόν βίον λαμπρόν ποιείσθαι” (OR 285)

Thus, the *polis* is a space where men can act and speak freely and it is the decline of this very space, due to the “rise of the social” that Arendt rejects. Benhabib (1990) rightly describes Arendt’s objection to the formation of a social space by saying,

“Arendt sees in this process the occluding of the political by the social and the transformation of the public space of politics into a pseudo space of social interaction, in which individuals no longer “act” but “merely behave” as economic producers, consumers, and urban city dwellers.”<sup>128</sup>

What has been seen so far is that the authentic political space was the public realm or the *polis* for that matter. The nature of this space has been transformed into a pseudo space in which authentic political action is not possible. Pseudo because according to Benhabib’s interpretation, men ‘no longer “act” but “merely behave” and therefore the space is not serving its original purpose<sup>129</sup>.

To properly understand Arendt’s action in context, more than just the *polis* need to be understood. As a matter of fact, to understand any of the vital human conditions, they must always be seen and understood alongside the ontological qualities previously described in the prior chapter. Benhabib also held this to be true when she said; “Although action is a central category in Arendt’s thought, without being placed in its proper context alongside natality and plurality, emphasis on it alone yields a truncated access to her thought.”<sup>130</sup> In other words, Arendt’s action needs to be understood together and in context with natality and plurality. Otherwise, an erroneous understanding of her results as has been the case with some who have criticised her.

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<sup>128</sup> Benhabib, S. (1990) “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative”, pg. 112.

<sup>129</sup> Benhabib (1996) *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, pg. 194.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* 197.

The wisdom and truth of this observation cannot be overemphasised. Only in this way, can Arendt's action be properly understood in its political context. An analysis of the public space and the *polis* in relation to plurality, natality consequently arises almost naturally. Those who formed part of the *polis* were all men of equal standing. They came forth out of their private space to interact, mix and distinguish themselves from other similar men. It was the space in which they acted and had spectators<sup>131</sup> who were themselves not actively engaged in speech or dialogue. As seen, men distinguished themselves from their equals in this public space. Both the spectators and the speakers and/or actors made use of public space to stand out from their equals.

### 2.2.3 Equality as a political concept

One of the outstanding and defining qualities of the *polis* is that it made men equal. They were made equal because men are by nature<sup>132</sup> not born nor created equal and they needed this created space to equalise them as citizens. Arendt explains that, "The equality of the Greek *polis*, its isonomy, was an attribute of the *polis* and not of men, who received their equality by virtue of citizenship, not by virtue of birth." (OR 23) In other words, there is an equality by virtue of citizenship and another equality that is by virtue of birth. Of interest is the former.

As opposed to Hobbes, Arendt saw man as being a 'social' before he is a 'political animal' who has nothing in common with Hobbes' so called 'state of nature'<sup>133</sup> (HC 30-31). She however, refers to equality in the

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<sup>131</sup> Spectators had different role to play, as opposed to actors, being removed from the scene and therefore not being directly involved in it, as shall be studied in greater detail shortly.

<sup>132</sup> By nature, Arendt means what is understood by the Greek φύσει.

<sup>133</sup> Hobbes in his book *Leviathan*, (Hobbes, T., *Leviathan*. Malcolm, N., (Ed.) Oxford: University, 2012. Part I, ch.13, 1.) comments that man in his natural condition is equal

political realm which, she claims, is different from our concept of equality (ibid., 32). Rather, equality in the political realm meant; “to live among and to have to deal only with one’s peers, and it presupposed the existence of ‘unequals’ who, as a matter of fact, were always the majority of the population in a city-state.” (ibid.)

Our human nature is something that all share as men. In this sense, men are inherently equal in as far as human dignity and other qualities that make men, human beings are concerned. However, existentially, all men are individuals and therefore unique. Arendt’s emphasis in this is that the individual man was made equal as a political being among his peers in the *polis*. “The polis was distinguished from the household in that it knew only ‘equals,’ whereas the household was the centre of the strictest inequality.” (ibid.)

In other words, she takes equality to be a political concept.<sup>134</sup> This

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in as far as ‘faculties of the body and mind are concerned’. His argument is that men are generally equal in these and that the differences in strength in body or quickness of mind are not of considerable significance.

<sup>134</sup> She describes three kinds of equality.

First is primal equality which is a ‘false’ kind of equality as was explained and is very typical of Hannah Arendt. Her longest descriptions of this kind are in the *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) though it first comes up in her article “Image of Hell” (1948). She explains and describes this kind of equality because it was necessary to foster it in order for the totalitarian regime to be effective. People had to believe that the only thing they all had in common was their potential death and that much as they were all different, in this they were equal.

understanding of equality has changed in modern times. In fact, she goes so far as to claim that equality as a political concept has been perverted (TOT 234). Before further explanation on this is given, a look at the purpose of equality would be of interest.

At one point, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she explains that nineteenth-century positivism and progressivism perverted the purpose of human equality. She explains,

“Men are unequal according to their natural origin, their different organisation, and fate in history. Their equality is an equality of rights only, that is, an equality of human purpose; yet behind this equality of human purpose lies, according to Jewish-Christian tradition another equality, expressed in the concept of one common origin beyond human history, human nature, and human purpose – the common origin in the mythical, unidentifiable Man who alone is God’s creation.” (TOT 234)

In the paragraph above, Arendt speaks of equality based on the fact of sharing a common human purpose. She then acknowledges another kind of equality expressed in the concept of one common origin. She does not

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Secondly, she briefly talks about an equality on an ontological level. She implies a common human origin but a divine origin which to her is of a more mythical nature (TOT 234). She also raises the fact of our common human nature and a common human purpose (ibid.). She describes all these without denying the fact that nevertheless, humans in the end are all individuals and are therefore different despite their equality in purpose. Her claim at this level is that the more one concentrates on equality at the natural level, the more our unchangeable and permanent differences become conspicuous.

Thirdly and most widely is her discussion of equality on a political level (TOT 234; HC 32, 39, 40, 41, 215). Here all men capable of stepping out into the polis are equal by virtue of their citizenship. It is this kind of equality which is also of interest to this study, and to Arendt is the preferred meaning of equality.

explain the human purpose but attributes it to Jewish-Christian tradition who advocate a common origin beyond human history, nature and purpose. This is equality at an ontological level yet it seems that she is not in agreement with its origin which she attributes to ‘the mythical, unidentifiable Man’. If mythical then man is not real and if unidentifiable then she means man without an identity who in fact is a nobody.

She does admit that, ‘This divine origin is a metaphysical concept on which the political equality of purpose may be based, the purpose of establishing mankind on earth’ (TOT 234). Of interest is her use of the term ‘may’ thereby implying that it might as well be of a different origin and not necessarily divine. In other words, she implies that political equality is based on a metaphysical concept even if she does not necessarily fully agree with the divine origin. For her, “Politically, it is not important whether God or nature is thought to be the origin of a people” (ibid.). If anything, on page 235 of TOT she condemns tribalism and racism for their “metaphysical rootlessness.” This would imply that having a metaphysical root is of some consequence in as far as her thinking is concerned.

Going back to the change in meaning of equality as a political concept, she claims that it was perverted when the Nazis in Germany set out to demonstrate what cannot be demonstrated in the totalitarian regime. Namely, that men are equal by nature and different only by history and circumstances (TOT 234). This would mean that they can be equalized not by rights as she had pointed out above, but by circumstances and education. Thus, equality was “perverted into a hierarchical structure where differences of history and organization were misinterpreted as differences between men, residing in natural origin.” (ibid.)

Originally, differing circumstances and conditions served as ‘protection’ meaning that such differences originally had a protective role. In the modern period, lack of these differences, result in a challenge since natural differences become all the more conspicuous. Consequently, natural differences such as skin colour or country of origin, which cannot and will not be changed are what stand out all the more. In Chapter 3 in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* under the subtitle; *The Jews and Society*, she explains the result of what happens when the protection of differing circumstances and conditions are removed by society. In summary, the result is that little space for individuals (and social groups) is left. “The more equal conditions are, the less explanation there is for the differences that actually exist between people; and thus, all the more unequal do individuals and groups become.” (TOT 54)

It means that their differences become all the more conspicuous and what is more is that now one has to deal with natural differences such as race, colour or tribe. (ibid.) That would mean that, if for example all other differences are removed, a black-skinned individual will be more conspicuously black in a white society. She goes on to explain that “This perplexing consequence came fully to light as soon as equality was no longer seen in terms of an omnipotent being like God or an unavoidable common destiny like death.” (ibid.) Meaning that equality at some higher level is necessary. This she says, is the great challenge of the modern period where the meaning of equality is being wrongly attributed.

“...its peculiar danger has been that in it man for the first time confronted man without the protection of differing circumstances and conditions. And it has been precisely this new concept of equality that has made modern race relations so difficult, for there we deal with natural differences which by no possible and conceivable change of conditions can become less conspicuous.”

(TOT 54)

Her description above of what is happening in today's society is well put. The 'equality of conditions' (TOT 54) or said differently, the removal of differing conditions, is harmful. This is more so if there is no higher level at which one can recognise that in the end, there is some factor or end such as death in which they are all equal.

“Whenever equality becomes a mundane fact in itself, without any gauge by which it may be measured or explained, then there is one chance in a hundred that it will be recognized simply as a working principle of a political organization in which otherwise unequal people have equal rights; there are ninety-nine chances that it will be mistaken for an innate quality of every individual, who is "normal" if he is like everybody else and "abnormal" if he happens to be different. This perversion of equality from a political into a social concept is all the more dangerous when a society leaves but little space for special groups and individuals, for then their differences become all the more conspicuous.” (TOT 54)

Differing circumstances and conditions are actually useful for modern race relations. In modern times, everyone who is like everyone else is considered to be 'normal' while anyone who happens to be different is considered to be 'abnormal'. This is what she terms as a 'perversion of equality from a political into a social concept' (ibid.) and “it is all the more dangerous when a society leaves but little space for special groups and individuals, for then their differences become all the more conspicuous.” (ibid.)

Her point is the fact that man is more than just his unchangeable and yet natural differences such as his nationality or race. He is more than just a German or a Jew. Reminders of these natural differences which are ever

present and cannot change are what result in what she terms ‘dumb hatred, mistrust and discrimination’. (ibid., 302) Should one therefore ignore these differences? Arendt seems to be against this. Instead she says,

“No doubt, wherever public life and its law of equality are completely victorious, wherever civilisation succeeds in eliminating or reducing to a minimum the dark background of difference, it will end in complete petrification and be punished, so to speak, for having forgotten that man is only the master, not the creator of the world.” (TOT 302)

Basically, what she is saying is that the differences should not be eliminated nor reduced to a minimum. This is because these differences are beyond the power of man. They are real and they are unchangeable because they are natural. The challenge would thus be in finding the right level of respect due to them in all justice. Only then would there be just treatment of individuals and social groups in their own right regardless of differences.

Arendt considers the case when circumstances and conditions were removed as is the case of Kafka’s characters<sup>135</sup>. Apart from their not having names, Arendt describes them as ‘lacking all the many superfluous detailed characteristics which together make up a real individual’ (EU 75). In order for us to be a real individual, such details are necessary as they form part of what we are and make us different from other individuals. Man cannot change this fact so there will always be an inequality despite our equality as humans.

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<sup>135</sup> Reference may be made to Kafka’s books entitled *The Trial* (Kafka, F., *The Trial*, London: Everyman’s Library, 1992) or *The Castle* (Kafka, F., *The Castle*, Oxford, UK, 2009) in which no personal description of individual characters is given.

At this point, it will be well to check how closely Arendt links equality to political freedom<sup>136</sup> and the significance of this. Her claim is that they were originally identical (OR 23). As has been seen, equality as in ancient times meant to dwell and deal with one's equals. She says that

“Equality, therefore, far from being connected with justice, as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed.” (HC 33)

What this implies is that these qualities in antiquity were understood differently. According to her, “neither equality nor freedom was understood as a quality inherent in human nature” (OR 23). Rather, they were ‘conventional and artificial, the products of human effort and qualities of the man-made world.’ (ibid.) Meaning that these qualities were there due to the *polis* in which they were ‘made equal’ even if artificially. Equality was thus attributed to the *polis* and not to men i.e. it was the *polis* that made them equal and therefore also made them free. The aspect of plurality is detected here since, “The life of a free man needed the presence of others. Freedom itself needed therefore a place where people could come together – the agora, the marketplace, or the polis, the political space proper.” (ibid., 24)

The necessary presence of others is a clear manifestation of the quality of the *polis* and of political action and consequently of political freedom. It is important to note that it is not in any space whatsoever that men are able to form a political space. In *On Revolution* Arendt says, ‘a political realm does not automatically come into being wherever men live together’ (ibid., 10). It was in the *polis* when men met as equal individual citizens and not as private persons (ibid., 23). Thus, it was the

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<sup>136</sup> More on this will be seen in detail in ensuing sub-sections.

purpose of their coming together that was the determining factor and it shows how and under what circumstances they formed their political space.

All in all, in the public sphere or *polis*, where men meet as equals, unequal people have equal rights because each is seen as one's equal. For Arendt, therefore, equality is a political concept. She noted the importance of not losing sight of the fact that at some level, men are all equal and if this notion is lost, as is the case today in modern society, unchangeable natural differences become all the more conspicuous and serve as dividing factors. The political sphere is the space where men originally met as equals. Unchangeable natural differences played no role. Rather, it was by speech and action that men distinguished themselves.

### 2.3 Speech and Action as actuality

Political action is among men, their equals, who, when they come together, are able to speak freely. Originally, referring back to ancient Greece, Arendt says, "most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words" (HC 26). Therefore, authentic political action involves and *is* speech. To speak freely is to act politically. Kateb (2000), in his article, "Political action: its nature and advantages", says

"The heart of Arendt's account of action in her writings is that authentic political action is speech – not necessarily formal speeches, but talk, exchanges of views – in the manner of persuasion and discussion. Political speech is deliberation

or discussion as part of the process of deciding some issue pertaining to the public good.”<sup>137</sup>

One may ask, if speech is action (political), then what is the content of this speech? Arendt is clearer about what it is not (HC 33, 37, 195, 208). As has already been seen, it does not include matters such as ‘housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organisational devices’ (HC 48, 53, 58, 65). One could refer to these as the practical aspects of political action, which she excludes from proper content of politics and does not endeavour to outline. She does mention that one speaks and thereby distinguishes themselves. She also mentions deliberation, persuasion and discussion but she does not clearly define what about. Neither does she clearly define actual content to be addressed in order for one to be singled out as outstanding or as different. Knowledge of this content would have been interesting but it does not necessarily hinder an understanding of the nature of Arendt’s concept of political action. In other words, for this study, context is of more interest than content.

Nevertheless, according to Kateb (2000), “Arendt’s suggestion is that the content of proper political action is politics itself.”<sup>138</sup> Elsewhere he makes the following observations of what Arendt’s content of authentic political action is;

“The content of authentic politics is therefore deliberation and dispute about what policies are needed to preserve and keep in good repair a political body, a form of government that has been designed to carry on its business by free deliberation, discussion, and dispute”

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<sup>137</sup> Kateb, G. “Political Action: It’s Nature and Advantages.” In Villa, D. R. (Ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Hannah Arendt* (pp. 130-148). Cambridge, U.K, New York, 2000, pg. 133.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

“Constitutional questions, questions concerning the spirit of the laws or the interpretation of the laws or (especially in modern times) changes in the political ground rules – all these are the stuff of authentic politics.”<sup>139</sup>

Why anyone who has read her work, would conclude or imply that politics itself is the content of Arendt’s authentic political action is understandable. For her, “the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself” (HC 206). This is the concept of actuality. By it she implies that when this is applied to action then the importance of the action would be in the performance of the act. In the same way implying that the greatness of politics is in doing politics (HC 206-207). In *The Human Condition* on page 207, she explains how action and speech were experienced as actuality. Allow me to address this issue a little further, given that this is quite specific to Arendt both in action and in deed as shall continuously be highlighted.

### 2.3.1 Performance as an actuality

Going back to Aristotle, Arendt explains that “work”<sup>140</sup>, ‘which is a specifically human achievement lies altogether outside the category of means and ends’ (HC 207). That they ‘are not qualities which may or may not be actualised but are themselves “actualities”’ (ibid.). Meaning

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>140</sup> Here she explains that Aristotle by work was referring to ‘living deeds’ and ‘spoken words’ conceptualised as the notion of *energeia* (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. Reeve, C.D.C., Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016, 1050a22-35) (“actuality”), ‘with which he designated all activities that do not pursue an end (*are ateleis*) and leave no work behind (*no par’ autas erga*), but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself. (HC 206) She also goes on to say in footnote 36 of the same page quoted that “It is of no importance in our context that Aristotle saw the highest possibility of “actuality” not in action and speech, but in contemplation and thought, in *theōria* and nous”.

that the means to achieve an end is already the end since ‘there is nothing higher to attain than this actuality itself’ (ibid.) which is the realisation of the very act.

She graphically describes a procedure to prove her point. “The breaking of eggs in action never leads to anything more interesting than the breaking of eggs. The result is identical with the activity itself: it is a breaking, not an omelette.” (EU 397) Her point is that the full actuality or the full meaning of action itself is in its performance. Therein lies its end. The means is the end or, ‘the “product” is identical with the performing act itself’ (HC 206). She thus implies that a means is not always a necessity to achieve certain ends<sup>141</sup> (HC 229) meaning that some ends are in the performance of the act itself. Therefore, action and speech themselves being the highest activities in the political realm, imply authentic political action<sup>142</sup> and the greatest that man can achieve is his own appearance and actualisation (HC 208).

Through authentic action<sup>143</sup> in the political space, man thus achieves his own actualisation. By action, through action and in action, i.e. through actuality as Arendt claims, is wherein lies the greatness of human acts.

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<sup>141</sup>Cf. ‘Kant tried to relegate the means-end category to its proper place and prevent its use in the field of political action’. (HC 156)

<sup>142</sup> In the modern times, Arendt says that there has been a ‘degradation of action and speech’ (HC 207). This she claims is implied by Adam Smith when he classifies all occupations which rest essentially on performance such as the military profession, churchmen, lawyers, physicals, etc together with menial services, the lowest and most unproductive labour (ibid.). Bradshaw also claims that to Arendt, action ‘has not been well regarded either by theorists (who find it too capricious) or by participants in politics (who seem to preoccupy themselves with the business of sustaining or improving life)’. (Bradshaw, L. (1989) *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, pg. 102)

<sup>143</sup> For Arendt, this includes speech.

It seems contradictory that at the very beginning in the Prologue of *The Human Condition*, Arendt says that the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable, is the activity of thinking (HC 5, 25). This would make thinking to be the highest human political activity as opposed to human action. Bradshaw (1989) points out that this is a contradiction because earlier Arendt says that acting is the highest political activity<sup>144</sup>. Where then is the connection between political action<sup>145</sup> and thinking? Which is superior? Acting or thinking? A possible answer to these questions, that Arendt provides, refers back to ancient times;

“Thought was secondary to speech, but speech and action were considered to be coeval and coequal, of the same rank and the same kind; and this originally meant not only that most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words, but more fundamentally that finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information or communication they may convey, is action.” (HC 25-26)

What this confirms is that for Arendt, speech (finding the right words at the right time) is action, as was pointed out before. In this book and in all her ensuing writings, she will continue to affirm this, sometimes clarifying this and at other times not. However, the question that arose was if acting and thinking were the same.

To attempt to clear this doubt, and in true Arendtian style, it will do well to go back to ancient Greek philosophy. In those times, during the

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<sup>144</sup> Bradshaw, (1989), *Acting and Thinking*, pg. 102.

<sup>145</sup> For Arendt, action is not to make and neither is it to fabricate and action should not be confused any of these two. To her it is a misconception of modern political thought which Karl Marx also inherited (HC 88-89).

existence of a *polis*, Arendt explains that the spectator was superior to the actor. This is because it was the spectator, not the actor, who could know and understand the spectacle (LMT 92). She infers that “as a spectator you may understand the “truth” of what the spectacle is about; but the price you have to pay is withdrawal from participating in it.” (LMT 93) The actor took part in the spectacle itself and actualised it yet the spectator had the chance to observe or view the spectacle from the outside and at a distance and was therefore able to get a fuller picture because he had a better chance at understanding the “truth” of it. It is for this reason and in this sense that the contemplative life was considered superior to the *vita activa*. This is a small discrepancy here compared to what she had said previously about the contemplative life in *The Human Condition* (HC 14-16). There she spoke against abasement of the *vita activa* (HC 16) but clarified that, “my use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*.” (HC 17). In her last work, *The Life of the Mind*, however, she seems to imply that in as far as understanding ‘truth’ is concerned, contemplative life is superior to the *vita activa*.

Now, the actor was highly dependent on the spectator, judge or audience because it is to them that he looked for fame and opinion (*doxa*). It is the spectator who judged the actor favourably or not, whether he was good or not, as boring or as interesting, whether they wanted to see and/or listen to him again, etc. Everything depended on the spectator’s final verdict. That is why the actor ‘must conduct himself in accordance with what spectators expect of him, and the final verdict of success or failure is in their hands.’ (LMT 94) The advantage there is to the spectators doing the judging, is that their verdict was impartial and not fuelled by a desire for fame or gain. However, they were not independent of the views of others and could be influenced.

As ordinary humans, they were also subject to erroneous judgement. However, Arendt does not get into this and for the moment it is out of the scope for this study. The main point and what is important at the moment is what Arendt says. That “it is not through acting but through contemplating that (...) the meaning of the whole, is revealed. The spectator, not the actor, holds the clue to the meaning of human affairs” (LMT 96). It would seem that the actors act, while the spectator contemplates and makes the final act of judgement.

Contemplation therefore reveals the meaning of the whole and at the same time, it is the spectator who holds the clue to the meaning. In this sense then, contemplation is superior to action. Also, at the same time as was seen, the actor is dependent on the spectator for the verdict. This is not contradictory. The greatness of human acts still lies in actualisation and this cannot be changed nor substituted. However, for a better understanding of the ‘truth’ of the act and, for a full overall meaning, contemplation is superior.

On a different note, it is important to note that the spectator mentioned above may exist in the plural otherwise it is impossible, according to Arendt, to arrive at a political philosophy as did Kant but not Hegel whose spectator existed strictly in the singular (LMT 96). The spectator’s possible existence in the plural is in line with Arendt’s concept of plurality. Her reasoning is that audiences change from generation to generation and much as each generation may witness the same spectacle, not every generation will draw the same conclusions from the same act nor learn the same lesson as prior generations may have done (ibid.). Yet the spectacle remains the same. The spectators can and usually exist in plural much as they are all different individuals. This implies that different verdicts may result from the same spectacle meaning that plurality plays a role on the verdict in that,

“the spectator’s verdict, while impartial and freed from the interests of gain or fame, is not independent of the view of others (...) The spectators, although disengaged from the particularity characteristic of the actor, are not solitary (...) Nor are they self-sufficient, like the ‘highest god’” (LMT 94).

They can be influenced by the view of the others which might contradict their own and they are not self-sufficient because they in themselves are not excellent as they themselves well know.

In relation to this, it is worth bringing up an observation made by Bradshaw (1989), cited below,

“She (Arendt) had a commitment to action, plurality and communication as the ground of all meaning, yet she was a philosopher in the most traditional sense; her own activity consisted in thinking and writing, (...). It is from this stance as a thinker, and not as an active participant in the affairs of the world, that she made these assertions.”<sup>146</sup>

I am not entirely in agreement with Bradshaw’s observation above since Arendt’s activity did not only consist in thinking and writing. She actively participated in the affairs of the world as for example in her report on the Eichmann trial. She physically attended the trial, read the necessary relevant documentation available and eventually wrote her report as she saw it. In every sense, one could say that just as Socrates, she put her neck on the line. Put differently, it would better to say that Arendt commends action, and as a thinker practises contemplation. Both are of interest to her. As has been seen, she generally ranks action over work and labour and yet at the very beginning she subordinates contemplative life to active life. This subordination of contemplative life

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<sup>146</sup> Bradshaw, L. (1989). *Acting and thinking*, pg. 103.

is on an ontological level and therefore cannot be compared to how she ranks action over labour and work. She blamed the ancient philosophers for subordination of the *vita activa* and in her book, *The Human Condition*, writes to restore it to its rightful place in political action. On a different note, given that she takes her 'stance as a thinker,' as Bradshaw claims, puts her in a better position to observe and thus make a judgement.

However, to contest the afore mentioned, ranking action above labour and work does not necessarily mean that Arendt is against contemplation. As accused above, yes, she was a thinker or a spectator for that matter. However, one could argue that she was also an actor because to her, authentic political action includes and/or is speech. One could further argue that she was more than just a thinker given that she personally took on an active role as opposed to being a mere spectator of the war. She acted in a public space when she became involved in Zionist discussions and activities in the years 1931-1932, begun writing for *Aufbau*, a German-language newspaper in New York, and when she acted as Executive director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction in 1949. She was also a lecturer during the rest of her life which is pure action and consequently actualisation through action. All these serve as proof of her active intervention in politics.

At the same time, however, in Bradshaw's words, Arendt was a 'philosopher in the most traditional sense' (ibid.) thus making her a thinker and therefore also a spectator or one in a better position to understand truth, judge and critique action. Hannah Arendt rejected the title of philosopher and avoided the use of the expression "political philosophy" claiming that this 'is extremely burdened by tradition' (EU 2) and does not rightly express what she intends. This has been clearly

recorded in an interview that she held with Günter Gaus in 1964<sup>147</sup>. In the same text she prefers to be referred to as a political thinker and makes it clear that to her, man as a thinking being is to philosopher just as man as an acting being is to politics.

Further reference may be made to an unpublished lecture that she gave in 1954 (ten years before the above interview took place) and which was originally delivered to the American Political Science Association. It was later published in *Essays in Understanding*. In it she describes how today,

“what the philosophers almost unanimously have demanded of the political realm was a state of affairs where action, properly speaking (i.e., not execution of laws or application of rules or any other managing activity, but the beginning of something new whose outcome is unpredictable), would be

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<sup>147</sup> “Gaus: I should like to hear from you more precisely what the difference is between political philosophy and your work as a professor of political theory.

ARENDR: The expression "political philosophy," which I avoid, is extremely burdened by tradition. When I talk about these things, academically or non-academically, I always mention that there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics. That is, between man as a thinking being and man as an acting being, there is a tension that does not exist in natural philosophy, for example. Like everyone else, the philosopher can be objective with regard to nature, and when he says what he thinks about it he speaks in the name of all mankind. But he cannot be objective or neutral with regard to politics. Not since Plato!

Gaus: I understand what you mean.

ARENDR: There is a kind of enmity against all politics in most philosophers, with very few exceptions. Kant is an exception. This enmity is extremely important for the whole problem, because it is not a personal question. It lies in the nature of the subject itself.

Gaus: You want no part in this enmity against politics because you believe that it would interfere with your work?

Arendt: "I want no part in this enmity," that's it exactly! I want to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy." (EU 2)

either altogether superfluous or remain the privilege of the few.” (EU 429)

Above, she highlights where the philosophers have supposedly unanimously erred. She also briefly outlines, that the proper content of political action has nothing to do with public administration of affairs in a so-called national housekeeping, as she was prone to say and as was seen when the discussion on the social realm was held. This also gives an answer to what she held to be the right content of political action.

Further, action, for Arendt is closely linked to her concept of natality<sup>148</sup> which is very much in line with her citation above when she says that action in the political real is rather ‘the beginning of something new whose outcome is unpredictable’. The other important thing to note is that she is advocating that this kind of action is not for the privileged few, but for the multitudes. What she implies is that many ought to have the privilege of acting in the public space and that action is not superfluous. Arendt has been both spectator and actor and she rates both roles highly. At the beginning, she says action is the highest activity of authentic political action and towards the end of *The Human Condition* and in her final book *The Life of the Mind*, she says that the spectator is in a better situation to understand action.

Going back to the issue at hand, in the *polis*, the mode of being together is in action and in speech (HC 208) where ‘men actualise the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to

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<sup>148</sup> This Arendtian concept was analysed in chapter 1 and has to do with what Arendt holds to be a truly human condition, namely that when man acts, all he does is new and therefore a beginning of something that never was and whose vast consequences cannot be known. In (HC 8-9) she holds that each man’s capacity of beginning something anew is inherent in all human activities.

make articulate and call into full existence' (ibid.). In other words, when men distinguish themselves they are thereby actualising themselves. Or put differently, the *polis* is the space where men become men by being men. Therefore, the nature of political action is such that by it, men become men or human beings. This is why she says, "Greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement." (ibid., 206)

By eliminating motivation and achievement, Arendt implies that the why or the intention as to why one acts is of no real consequence since greatness would lie only in its performance which is a utilitarian view.<sup>149</sup> Thereby she clearly distinguishes between the act itself from the motivation or intention and any resulting consequences. With this she claims, human action is different from human behaviour which the Greeks judged according to "moral standards" (HC 205) because action;

"can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*." (HC 205)

It no longer applies because of natality and so action is always new. According to Arendt, this implies that it cannot be judged by any existing standards such as morals. Later in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and then again in *The Life of the Mind*, she will again come back to motivation. As for now, she will hold that 'the greatest that man can achieve is his own achievement and actualisation. And that 'This

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<sup>149</sup> This utilitarian view she attributes to both Pericles and Homer. Ref to HC 205.

actualisation resides and comes to pass in those activities that exist only in sheer actuality.’ (HC 208)

Arendt goes on to lament how this understanding of political action as judgeable by existing political standards, is but “a feeble echo of the prephilosophical Greek experience of action and speech as sheer actuality” (ibid., 207). Thereby implying that this is not how it was meant to be. Rather, “politics is a *technê*” (HC 207), belongs to the arts where, ‘as in the performance of a dancer,’ (...) the “product” is identical with the performing act itself’ (ibid.) meaning action and speech “are only in actuality and therefore the highest activities in the political realm” (ibid.). She also further laments that action and speech were ‘implicitly degraded’ when Adam Smith “classifies all occupations which rest essentially on performance – such as the military profession, “churchmen, lawyers, physicians and opera-singers” – together with “menial services” the lowest and most unproductive “labour” (ibid.).

Previously, she will quote him where he says, “menial tasks and services generally perish in the instant of their performance and seldom leave any trace or value behind them” (ibid., 103). Arendt’s claim is that it was occupations such as healing, play-acting, that “furnished ancient thinking with examples for the highest and greatest activities of man.” (HC 207) It is not that these actions perish but that the performance of the act is in itself, the accomplishment of the act. To say that it ‘perishes’ goes against Arendt’s understanding of fulfilment or realisation of the act. Actions do not perish<sup>150</sup>, rather they lead to other actions and so on. They are also remembered (ibid., 208).

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<sup>150</sup> Aristotle’s notion of *praxis* is such that in a strict sense, it is confined to rational action on a decision (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Irwin, T. (Trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett. 1094a5,7; 1139a20; EE 1222b20, 1224a29). In a most strict sense, *praxis* is confined to rational action which is its own end meaning it has no end beyond it.

The unexpected results from actions are further explored by Arendt and are the very actions that were previously briefly explained in the prior chapter. Actions lead to unforetold reactions which in turn lead to other actions and so on. In other words, they are unpredictable.

### 2.3.2 Unpredictable and Irreversible

Arendt characterises political action by describing how they have boundless consequences and are therefore unpredictable. For her, authentic political action is unexpected and unpredictable. This is contrary to procedural and expected action proper to bureaucracies that govern modern states. She says that “The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.” (ibid., 178)

Her explanation is that, “action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners” (ibid., 190). By this she means that the end of initiated actions cannot be known. Neither is it possible to foretell that the results of one act will only have immediate consequences on another. Fry phrases it differently; “Of all parts of the active life, political action is most connected to initiating something new, and that capacity is the result of natality, or the fact that humans are born with untold potential.”<sup>151</sup>

Fry does not differ from what Arendt explains. She attributes this unpredictability to ‘natality, or the fact that humans are born with untold potential’. What Arendt says is that one act necessarily leads to another (reaction) which in turn leads to another and so is not (and cannot) be

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<sup>151</sup> Fry, K. (2014), “Natality” pg. 30.

confined to two actors. This goes on in an undefined and boundless way. Every act is new since the actors are different individuals. An authentic political action is therefore necessarily boundless as well as being unpredictable. If on top of it, one is dealing with many individuals living together in a *polis* then the unpredictability, boundlessness and consequent reactions only increase and are more diverse.<sup>152</sup>

One has to acknowledge that each new birth comes with potentially new ideas and therefore, in the same way, so does each new generation. Not knowing where an act is going to lead nor when nor where it will end up makes living together a challenge. How ought one to accept each new change with each new generation acting together, since ‘action always establishes relationships’? (HC 190)

Arendt is of the view that ‘much as these actions are within the realm of human affairs, there can never be a framework that can reliably withstand the onslaught with which each new generation must insert itself’ (ibid., 191). The way in which, a new reaction will react to a phenomenon cannot be known. In other words, there is no formula that one may follow and no existing blueprint of what must be done since action in itself is ‘inherently unpredictable’. This is because when men react, they do so freely. People may react differently to similar situations and they do so because they are free to do so. This would mean that living together is indeed a challenge. Consequently then, political action is also a challenge and a risk because political action is also free action.

Put differently, the outcome of any given action is unpredictable and one cannot know what in effect will happen as a consequence of it. To avoid a risky outcome, what Arendt does is advocate for the ‘political virtue of

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<sup>152</sup> Kristeva sees them as the two stumbling blocks to judgement in the modern practice of politics. (Kristeva, J. (1999). *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*. Collins, F. (Trans.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pg. 77-78).

moderation' and of 'keeping within bounds.'. (HC 191) These are political virtues that in some way check action's unpredictability and boundlessness. In fact, she says, 'the old virtue of moderation, of keeping within bounds, is indeed one of the political virtues par excellence' (ibid.).

These may offer some protection but they are helpless in the face of actions that are inherent and unpredictable (ibid.). Arendt adds that this is 'because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation' however small the act may be. (ibid., 190) Actions due to natality are unpredictable because it is impossible to know or control the outcome of an action, however small. And they are boundless because it is impossible to know the outcome of an action which in turn sets off other reactions which in themselves are also uncontrollable and unstoppable. La Caze makes an interesting observation of the boundlessness of the act of political forgiveness<sup>153</sup> claiming that, 'not all wrongs are committed unknowingly' thereby implying that some acts even if they are boundless, are also predictable. i.e. not all acts are unpredictable. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt explains that, "the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action" (HC 114).

The unpredictability of actions is classified in accordance with two features by La Caze; first, the feature of human changeability and the second is the fact that, 'we cannot envisage the results of our actions'<sup>154</sup>. Human beings change with time and they are free. When they act, they

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<sup>153</sup> A deeper analysis of forgiveness as a redirector of political action is necessary and follows consequently. It follows at the end of this section as well as in the next chapter when morality of action will be considered. La Caze, M. "Promising and Forgiveness". In Hayden (Ed.), *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, pg. 212.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 215.

do so according to the dictates of reason (or not) and therefore vary from individual to individual. The point is that there is no instinctive way of acting such that actions of men may be classified together because they will be similar unless like other instinctive animals, they have been conditioned to do so. Actions vary precisely because they are not necessarily instinctive. Even instinctive actions of men as rational beings can be dominated<sup>155</sup> meaning that man can reasonably and willingly act against instinct.

For La Caze, Arendt's second classification of unpredictability is because 'we cannot envisage the results of our actions'<sup>156</sup>. As has been described, this feature is due to plurality and natality. Several free men react to an ensuing action and each action results in a new action and reaction and so on and so forth in a boundless and unpredictable manner regardless of how insignificant this act may seem. She herself says, 'the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation' (HC 199). Bearing this in mind, Arendt explains the following in *Between Past and Future*:

“Human action, projected into a web of relationships where many and opposing ends are pursued, almost never fulfils its original intention; no act can ever be recognised by its author as his own with the same happy certainty with which a piece of work of any kind can be recognised by its maker. Whoever begins to act must know that he has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable. (BPF 84)

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<sup>155</sup> An example is the Christian martyrs who act against the instinct to preserve life and willingly give it up for their Christian belief.

<sup>156</sup> La Caze, M. “Promising and Forgiveness”, pg. 21.

It is interesting that Hannah Arendt did not foretell what reactions she would get from her written articles and/or books. For example, when she covered Adolf Eichmann's trial for *The New Yorker*, who would have thought there would be such an outcry both in favour and against her report. Or who would have foretold that over fifty years later, her analysis would continue to be relevant and increasingly discussed or that a movie<sup>157</sup> would be made as a result of it? Or that the people acting in it would become famous? Or that there would be university courses conducted in which this report is highlighted? The list goes on endlessly.

As mentioned above, the vast and unpredictable nature of action is a consequence of human freedom and plurality, i.e. the fact that there are many acting beings who enter a web of actions or of 'human relationships' (HC 184) and events that result in reactions from other actors. It is "unpredictability which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it" because of man's ability to begin (TOT 458). She describes the vastness of this unpredictability by saying that, "The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end." (HC 233)

What she is implying here is that actions endure forever, so to speak. There is another feature implied in the above text and that is irreversibility. Actions cause other reactions and so on but always in a forward manner until the end of time. They are not reversible and neither can they be undone because every action becomes a reaction. Arendt

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<sup>157</sup> A movie entitled Hannah Arendt was released in 2013 that depicts her covering the Eichmann trial. There are also several other movies about Eichmann who became a much-known figure and could possibly be as a consequence of what she wrote.

herself says, “men never have been and never will be able to undo or even control reliably any of the processes they start through action.” (HC 232-233). Nevertheless, “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted.” (HC 247) In other words, natality allows for a change of action or the beginning of new actions by men beginning anew. New actions and new beginnings, thanks to natality, imply change. To change the course of action requires the introduction of an action capable of altering the direction of ongoing reactions.

#### 2.4 Moderation of Political Action

If actions are irreversible, how then does one undo the past? How does one deal with a ‘bad’ action or with ‘wrong’ or unwanted consequences? What happens to the challenges and risks implied by unpredictability and irreversibility? Previously, it was mentioned how important the virtue of moderation was as a political virtue (HC 191). However, she goes on to claim that, “while the various limitations and boundaries we find in every body politic may offer some protection against the inherent boundlessness of action, they are altogether helpless to offset (...) its inherent unpredictability.” (ibid.) This is because actions can never be fully restrained even by laws within a body politic.

Moderation of and by the people in the *polis* is necessary as a bid to try to keep actions within bounds. This Arendt claims, is much more effective than ‘the will to power, as we are inclined to believe’ (HC191). In other words, what she is trying to say is that a will to power would provoke more actions and reactions than would the practise of political moderation. This is so because the use of power implies action and all action implies a new beginning, therefore use of power implies a new

beginning. however, if there is no space where men can congregate, then there is no generation of power.

For Arendt, men's presence and them living together is 'the only indispensable material factor in the generation of power' among men (ibid., 201). For as long as men remain active and live together and 'the potentialities of action are always present' will power remain with them as well (ibid.). How then does one moderate action when there is power?

To explain this, let us imagine a political sphere or public sphere where there are no men. Where there are no men, there is no action, where there is no action, there is no new beginning. Where there is no new beginning there can be no change. Without change there is no efficacy, and consequently lack of efficacy implies no power. Thus, one may also say that action sustains the public sphere. For Arendt, power and public space go together — if one disappears, so does the other. Likewise, if men do not act together, they destroy this power<sup>158</sup> hence the need for moderation. Since there will always be power where men act together, Arendt suggests the *use* of power. This is because political power has the ability to moderate action.

With the use of power, it is possible to direct certain acts. It is therefore important that power itself is regulated and is not abused. Arendt's gives both the Greek and Latin equivalents of power to be *dynamis* and *potentia* respectively as well as 'the German *Macht* which derives from *mögen* and *Möglichkeit*, not from *machen*' (HC 200). Because of these translations, she attributes a "potential" character to power. The potential nature of power is in part due to the potential<sup>159</sup> nature of the public

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<sup>158</sup> That is why she says, "And whoever, for whatever reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons." (HC 201).

<sup>159</sup> Arendt, H., (1998) *The Human Condition*, pg. 199.

space which can be disintegrated when men cease to come together and to act together – a phenomena which in itself is just as unpredictable. To Arendt, therefore, power exists only in actuality and “is actualised only where word and deed have not parted company.” (ibid., 201) If these two separate, to become independent activities, then the gathering is no longer a political one (ibid. 26).

Apart from having a potential nature, political power is also boundless with its only physical limitation being the existence of other people as has already been seen. Arendt explains that since ‘human power corresponds to the condition of plurality’ (ibid.), ‘power can be divided without decreasing it’ (ibid.). This would mean that the same amount of power can be shared among a different number of people be they more or less, without diminishing power itself. Therefore, in order for there to be some sort of control over power, it ought to be moderated. This is the true political challenge and what constitutes authentic political action; the exercise of power without the abuse of freedom.<sup>160</sup> This is true moderation and what Arendt advocates for in order to keep political action within certain bounds.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> More will be commented on freedom in section 2.5.1.

<sup>161</sup> In *On Revolution*, Arendt describes how the bounds were set up so that power, in terms of speech and action of the men who congregated together, was administered and exercised in the case of America, resulted in nothing less than the American constitution, (OR 140) ‘properly called civil rights’ (OR 24). Bounds therefore refer to laws that respect freedom. Elsewhere in her article Truth and Politics, she says power should be checked “by a constitution, a bill of rights, and by a multiplicity of powers, as in the system of checks and balances, in which, in Montesquieu’s words, ‘*le pouvoir arrête le pouvoir*’ – that is, by factors that arise out of and belong to the political realm proper – but by something that arises from without, has its source outside the political realm, and is as independent of the wishes and desires of the citizens as is the will of the worst tyrant. (BPF 240)

The above has dealt with moderation of action of the people. However, when it comes to moderation of action on the individual level, then self-moderation is key in trying to curb action and to have any kind of control or influence over it. It deals more directly with the actual use of freedom as shall now be seen.

#### 2.4.1 Power of Promise

The remedy that Arendt proposes for self-moderation is the use of a promise, which once made, changes the boundlessness of an action. A promise made, especially in the presence of several others is binding and therefore possesses a certain compelling force that helps to direct one's actions. In this way, they help to draw lines and establish new and stable terms of interaction thereby constituting 'authentic, unconditioned forms of action that are self-limiting chains of sequences that action can unleash' says Buckler in his book, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*<sup>162</sup>. In other words, it checks the boundless nature of an action. For Arendt,

“The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past....and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up...islands of security” (HC 237)

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<sup>162</sup> Buckler, S. (2011). *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the Tradition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pg. 101.

Making and keeping promises is something that is binding since one gives their word to do (or not to do) something or to act (or not to act) in a particular way. If one is true to their word as used to be the case more so in earlier days where one's word of honour was truly binding and trustworthy, then one can rely on the given word, and in this way the uncertain future may be made more predictable by relying on one's promise in which it was established how one would react in a given situation. The fact that one is bound to another by a promise implies the element of plurality, thereby making it a political factor as well.

Promises made before or in presence of a group of persons prove to be more binding. People feel more compelled to act in a given way more so when they are watched. This proves to be more intense if one is being watched by people who were there when the promise was being made and therefore expect you to act in the 'promised' way. These are the witnesses. A witness is likely to hold you accountable. A promise thus has more power when made before others and is the power of the promise over the promise maker. Here again we have the aspect of plurality. Arendt refers to this power as "the power of stabilisation inherent in the faculty of making promises"<sup>163</sup> (HC 243). She traces it back to ancient Rome's legal system in which its power was used in treaties as well in their agreements and comments, that resulted in an inviolability of agreements and treaties (*pacta sunt servanda*). Contract theories have been used from ancient tradition and these attest to "the fact that the power of making promises has occupied the centre of

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<sup>163</sup> Svampa interpretes Arendt to hold that promises are fundamental in politics, given that men are bound mutually obliging them to take responsibility for their future actions. Svampa also holds that power lies in the meeting or joining of promises. (Svampa, L. M., (2014). "Notas sobre la promesa en el pensamiento de Friedrich Nietzsche y Hannah Arendt." *Tópicos. Revista de Filosofía* 46, pgs. 75-93)

political thought over the centuries.” (HC 244)

Promises are made despite men knowing and without any possibility of being in full control of what tomorrow will hold for them. They are also made without knowing what the consequences of their action may be among their fellow men – equals of the *polis*. This;

“Man's inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom; and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future, is the price they pay for plurality (...), for the joy of inhabiting together with others” (HC 244).

What men pretend with a promise, is to master the above-mentioned unpredictability that a promise pretends to dispel, as if man were complete master of himself and of others. It is the price, according to Arendt, that we pay for freedom.<sup>164</sup> Not knowing the consequences of our actions nor of the future, is the price we pay for plurality.

Other than the afore mentioned power, Arendt also claims that promises have the power to bind citizens together (HC 245). This would be the case when several make the same promise and can be relied on to ‘act in concert’ (ibid., 179). “The sovereignty of a body of people bound and kept together, not by an identical will which somehow magically inspires them all, but by an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding” (ibid., 245)

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<sup>164</sup> Taminioux holds that “the freedom inherent in action is both a blessing and a misfortune” and that “It is because of these disabilities that action demands a redemption.” (Taminioux, J. “Athens and Rome,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, pg. 169).

What is binding here is an agreed purpose which Arendt claims acquires a “superiority over those who are completely free” (HC 245). A promise implies duty and if people adhere to this duty then coherence in the public realm is assured as she quotes Socrates to have done<sup>165</sup>. Socrates did not shy away from his verdict and remained true to “the commitment involved in the trial” (CR 59). With a promise, action is kept in check and action’s inherent boundlessness becomes not so boundless anymore. Arendt also explains that it is sovereign in the sense that for a limited time, it is able to ‘cheat’ the incalculable future and thereby be independent of it even if just in a limited way (HC 245).

By promising, people are bound or held together and are compelled to act in a given or pre-established way. Arendt also claims that the function of the faculty of promising is to master unpredictability and unreliability of actions freely performed (HC 244). A promise or a contract have a binding effect, so to speak.

“The danger and the advantage inherent in all bodies politic that rely on contracts and treaties is that they, unlike those that rely on rule and sovereignty, leave the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men as they are, using them merely as the medium, as it were, into which certain islands of predictability are thrown and in which certain guideposts of reliability are erected. The moment promises lose their character as isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty, that is, when this faculty is misused to cover the whole ground of the future and to map out a path secured in all directions, they lose their binding power and the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating.” (HC 244)

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<sup>165</sup> Hannah, A. *Crises of the Republic: Lying in politics. Civil disobedience. On violence. Thoughts on politics and revolution.* New York etc.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, pg. 59. This will henceforth be abbreviated to CR.

What she is saying above is that human affairs continue to be unpredictable and unreliable. However, this is used as a medium for some predictability and reliability. For instance, regardless of what may happen, one may promise to do X. That X will be done is a predictable action and is therefore a means to curb unpredictable. Arendt also says that it is possible to misuse this faculty of promise. One promises to do X but instead does Y. When or if this happens, is when promises 'lose their binding power' making the enterprise 'self-defeating'. This is what she refers to as the inherent danger of promises (HC 244).

Promises are meant to be kept and contracts tend to keep people bound, meaning that promises have some sort of power or force (HC 244-245) over the people involved. When it comes to this force or power, Arendt speaks of a kind of sovereignty.

“The sovereignty of a body of people bound and kept together, not by an identical will which somehow magically inspires them all, but by an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding, shows itself quite clearly in its unquestioned superiority over those who are completely free, unbound by any promises and unkept by any purpose. This superiority derives from the capacity to dispose of the future as though it were the present, that is, the enormous and truly miraculous enlargement of the very dimension in which power can be effective.” (HC 245)

In the strictest sense, there is no true dominion over the future because of “the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act.” (HC 244) One could argue that here it is still free will that is superior and not the promise. This would be because

it is precisely out of free will that men subject themselves to the promise. Only when one willingly subjects themselves to a promise does the promise acquire the unquestioned superiority cited above. Also, given that men can still change their mind even after having subjected themselves to the promise, the free will is still superior to the promise since it is capable of breaking the promise, hence the unpredictability. In other words, there will be unpredictability because of man's freedom which will always be there for as long as men continue to act. The force or power that men rely on so that promises are kept is what is referred to as good will. As Arendt herself puts it,

“In so far as morality is more than the sum total of *mores*, of customs and standards of behaviour solidified through tradition and valid on the ground of agreements, both of which change with time, it has, at least politically, no more to support itself than the good will to counter the enormous risks of action by readiness to forgive and to be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them.” (HC 245)

Put differently, the risk of action in the political field is overcome by ‘good will’, ‘readiness to forgive and be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them’. This is all morally significant. A lot has been said about promise and how mutual promise is binding. In chapter 2 of this work, a lot was also said about forgiveness. The other interesting point brought up above is Arendt's admission that morality is much more than ‘the sum total of mores’ or customs and standards of behaviour which change with time.

The holding of a promise as was seen before, is based on the good will of the one making the promise; a moral precept which Arendt claims is ‘not applied to action from the outside’ nor ‘from some supposedly higher faculty or from experiences outside of action's own reach.’ (HC

246) Therefore, it is a free individual act and the risk involved in making and keeping promises is the same as that of readiness to forgive and to actually forgive given that forgiveness has its own power over action.

#### 2.4.2 Power of Forgiveness

As has just been seen, “forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past” (HC 237). It was also seen that for Arendt, “the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action” (HC 114). It is one of Arendt’s key concepts because by it, there is moderation of action and thereby curbing its boundlessness to some extent. Forgiveness, closely related to reconciliation, is a feature that first comes up for Arendt in her dissertation written in the mid 1920s. She later develops it further especially in *The Human Condition* in which she develops this concept in relation to moderation of political action. She also dedicates articles to it in an effort to try to reconcile what happened in Germany during the second world war. Basically, it is a concept to which she dedicated quite a bit of thought given her various publications and writings<sup>166</sup>.

In true Arendtian style, she goes back to ancient Rome where awareness of this concept is seen as a corrective remedy for action as is shown in *parcere subiectis* – to spare the vanquished – and/or in the right to commute the death sentence (HC 239). However, its discovery, she attributes to Jesus of Nazareth, but she gives her own in-depth

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<sup>166</sup> In *The Human Condition* is a section entitled, “Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive” (HC236-243), “Understanding in Politics. The Difficulties of Understanding” (EU 308), “A Way toward the Reconciliation of the Peoples” in *Jewish Writings* (JW 258-264), originally published as “Ein Mittel zur Versöhnung der Volker” in *Porvenir* 3, Buenos Aires in 1942, etc.

description of a correct understanding of this concept and how it ought to be applied in the political context.

She begins by saying that forgiveness is not necessarily a religious concept. She says that; “The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense. (ibid. 238)<sup>167</sup>

In her interpretation of Jesus’ concept of forgiveness and as relevant to this study, she explains that apart from God, men also have the power to forgive and that this forgiveness must come from the heart. That forgiveness ‘must be mobilised by men toward each other before they can hope to be forgiven by God also’ (HC 239) and that the ‘extremity of crime’ or of the ‘willed evil’ is of no consequence<sup>168</sup> for no matter how radical the evil, men must forgive men “for they<sup>169</sup> know not what they do” (ibid). It is in this that she accuses Jesus’ formulation of forgiveness to be radical (ibid.).

“Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to

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<sup>167</sup> She goes on to explain that: “It has been in the nature of our tradition of political thought (and for reasons we cannot explore here) to be highly selective and to exclude from articulate conceptualization a great variety of authentic political experiences, among which we need not be surprised to find some of an even elementary nature. Certain aspects of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth which are not primarily related to the Christian religious message but sprang from experiences in the small and closely-knit community of his followers, bent on challenging the public authorities in Israel, certainly belong among them, even though they have been neglected because of their allegedly exclusively religious nature. (HC 238)

<sup>168</sup> Here she quotes Matt. 16:27.

<sup>169</sup> Referring to those who commit the offence, sin or crime.

change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.” (HC 240)

She acknowledges that it will always be necessary to forgive others who wrong you because of the unpredictable nature of action. “But trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly.”<sup>170</sup> (ibid.) In other words, there will always be a need for men to forgive each other for as long as they live together.<sup>171</sup>

Due to plurality, men live together, our actions inevitably impact others since man is a social being. Forgiveness is necessary for men to continue acting. Kampowski (2008) is of the same view going further to claim that

“for Arendt, trespassing, in the sense of causing inconveniences, flows from the very nature of action. The only way to avoid trespassing is to renounce action altogether.

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<sup>170</sup> At this point she inserts a footnote in which she justifies this interpretation by quoting from Luke 17: 1-5. She goes on to say; “Jesus introduces his words by pointing to the inevitability of “offenses” (*skandala*) which are unforgivable, at least on earth; for “woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea”; and then continues by teaching forgiveness for “trespassing” (*hamartanein*).” (HC 240)

<sup>171</sup> Aller provides a similar definition for forgiveness saying, “forgiveness is undoing or reversing a misdeed by reversing time and acting upon the misdeed, cleansing and repeating it in the past, and making it as if it did not happen. Such an act of forgiveness, thus, releases the offender from the offensive past by giving the offender a new past, a new beginning, and the possibility of beginning anew.” (Aller, C.R. (2010). “Undoing What Has Been Done: Arendt and Levinas on Forgiveness.” In *Forgiveness in Perspective* Smit, M. (Ed.) Amsterdam: Brill Academic Publishers, pg. 22)

Therefore, forgiveness of trespasses is necessary to make continued action possible”<sup>172</sup>.

The alternative of no action would not be an alternative but by forgiving or dismissing, men are constantly released. This implies that men will not be caught up in the same act and neither would they be victims of the consequence of one same act or deed. Something from which, she says, we cannot recover. “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act, would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we can never recover” (HC 237).

According to Arendt, forgiveness is the only act that can never be predicted.

“the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action. Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.” (HC 241)

Elsewhere she refers to forgiveness as

“one of the greatest human capacities and perhaps the boldest of human actions insofar as it tries the seemingly impossible, to undo what has been done, and succeeds in making a new

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<sup>172</sup> Kampowski, S. (2008). *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning: the action theory and moral thought of Hannah Arendt in the light of her dissertation on St. Augustine*. Cambridge, U.K.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., pg. 39.

beginning where everything seemed to have come to an end” (EU 308).

Above, Arendt points out that it is no easy action and that it tries to do the impossible. Through forgiveness, one is able to redirect an already started action and reaction process and even go so far as to ‘undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing’ (HC 237). This is similar to the function that a promise does to the action and reaction process as was seen previously.<sup>173</sup> Promises, if kept, provide a certain level of certainty for the unpredictable future. Therefore, while promises are in some sense binding, forgiveness in some sense serves to undo the past. Both faculties go together and she admits that both are human faculties. I would also like to mention that whilst both in some way are able to tackle the issue of unpredictability of action, they also enforce action through both promise and forgiveness.

Without forgiveness, we would ‘be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever’ (ibid. 236). Through forgiveness the chain or web of actions is broken and redirected. The forgiving act itself must be done in public in the presence of others in the public space because to her, “forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one's self.” (ibid. 237) In other words using Arendtian terms, the acts of forgiving and promising are political in nature since they require the presence of others. It was also seen that forgiveness is political in nature because it makes living in society possible. This is also why she relates these closely to the human condition of plurality. She does note that one cannot forgive oneself in the same way that promises cannot be made to

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<sup>173</sup> Reference was made at the very beginning of this chapter: “The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises.” (HC 237)

oneself. Plurality is there as a necessary condition for forgiveness and for promise thereby making them political.

Her admission that Jesus is the discoverer of the concept of forgiveness is of significance and her bold admission of it is admirable. It shows an openness to truth and a humble recognition of it regardless of its source. She gives her own interpretation of this forgiveness to be a human power but quotes from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke<sup>174</sup> to back up her arguments. She admits that men have the power to forgive sins but denies that this power is derived from God<sup>175</sup> (HC 239). Rather, the power to forgive sins ‘must be mobilised by men toward each other’ (ibid.). Only then can they live together in society and continued action is made possible as pointed out earlier.

Another interesting factor regarding forgiveness is that Arendt holds that it, ‘does not apply to the extremity of crime and willed evil’ (ibid.) because ‘crime and willed evil are rare’ (ibid.). Nevertheless, her overall conclusion is significant;

“Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.” (HC 240)

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<sup>174</sup> In her footnotes 76 and 77 on page 239 she quotes Luke 5:21-24 from the Bible with cf. Matthew 9:4-6 or Mark 12:7-10), Luke 7:49, Matthew 18:35; Mark 11:25, Matthew 6:14-15)

<sup>175</sup> This is contrary to the Catholic Christian teaching. In Catholic teaching, only God has the power to forgive sins but He gives this power to priests. “Only God forgives sins (Mark 2:7). Since he is the Son of God, Jesus says of himself, "The Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" and exercises this divine power: "Your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5,10; Luke 7:48). Further, by virtue of his divine authority he gives this power to men to exercise in his name (John 20:21-23). (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1441)

When commenting on the text above, Kampowsky says that what Arendt is saying above is that forgiveness is a political necessity much more than an act of generosity or friendship.<sup>176</sup> Without it, acting and living together would be next to impossible. Nevertheless, when a deed has been forgiven, it is not undone. Forgiveness does not undo evil.<sup>177</sup> The evil done remains. However, the predictive cycle is broken because the usual natural reaction toward evil is evil. The way Arendt explains it and as has been seen, promises serve as a possible remedy for unpredictability while the remedy for irreversibility of action is the power to forgive.

As admitted in the quote above, forgiveness is necessary ‘for men to remain free agents’ and that the ability to begin something new is indeed a ‘great power’. It can never be predicated (HC 241) and ‘is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven’ (ibid.). Forgiveness though, unpredictable, can begin something new in action.

Gottsegen sums it up by saying that the virtue of forgiveness ‘enables the citizenry to free themselves from the consequences of actions that might otherwise lock them into sterile cycles of action-bred reaction and mechanical vengeance’<sup>178</sup>. Kiess, when commenting on the passage

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<sup>176</sup> Kampowski. (2008). *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning*, pg. 40.

<sup>177</sup> She also mentions that there was a ‘rudimentary sign of an awareness that forgiveness may be the necessary corrective for the inevitable damages resulting from action in the Roman principle to spare the vanquished (*parcere subiectis*) and that this wisdom was entirely unknown to the Greeks. (HC 239) Her emphasis nevertheless is on the forgiveness that Jesus of Nazareth taught and as and how she herself understood it as freedom from vengeance (HC 241).

<sup>178</sup> Gottsegen, M.G., (1994) *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, pg. 59.

above (HC 241), claims that, “In this way, forgiveness epitomises Arendt’s identification of action with natality: it is undetermined by what came before, and through it, it expresses the uniqueness of the person who performs it”.<sup>179</sup> Forgiveness itself is a new action that results in another new action but the act of forgiving, Arendt claims, continues to retain “something of the original character of action” (HC 114) as mentioned earlier. This is not completely in sync with how Kiess explains it when he says that forgiveness is undetermined by what came before.

A comparison between forgiveness and promise yields that forgiveness is similar to promise in that, it has the same effect as promises in that it helps to keep action in check to a certain degree. Arendt points out that

“Forgiving and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (though not necessarily individual or private) affair in which what was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it. This, too, was clearly recognized by Jesus...”  
(HC 241)

In other words, what was done was done, but it is forgiven for the sake of who did it. This is where it becomes eminently personal, making it so crazy an act that one would wonder who would do such a thing? Who can forgive? Arendt’s response to this is that ‘only love has the power to forgive’ (ibid., 242). But Arendt claims that love is apolitical. She says, “Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.” (Ibid.) In as far as she is concerned, “Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others.” (HC 242) She also says that it (love),

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<sup>179</sup> Kiess, J., (2016), *Hannah Arendt and Theology*, pg. 163.

“[I]ndeed possesses an unequalled power of self-revelation and an unequalled clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings, and transgressions.” (HC 242)

For Arendt therefore, love, which is ‘unworldly,’ ‘apolitical,’ ‘antipolitical’ and ‘perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces’ (HC 242) is not the only reason for forgiveness. Rather, she is of the view that respect, “because it concerns only the person, is quite sufficient to prompt forgiving of what a person did, for the sake of the person.” (HC 243). This is how she puts it;

“Respect, at any rate, because it concerns only the person, is quite sufficient to prompt forgiving of what a person did, for the sake of the person. But the fact that the same *who*, revealed in action and speech, remains also the subject of forgiving is the deepest reason why nobody can forgive himself; here, as in action and speech generally, we are dependent upon others, to whom we appear in a distinctness which we ourselves are unable to perceive. Closed within ourselves, we would never be able to forgive ourselves any failing or transgression because we would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive.” (HC 243)

Arendt explains that respect is applicable in the larger domain of human affairs unlike love. She also compares her understanding of respect to Aristotle’s *philia politikē*, which she claims, “is a kind of ‘friendship’ without intimacy and without closeness; it is a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us, and this regard is independent of qualities which we may admire or of achievements which we may highly esteem.” (HC 243). At this point she

lament that the “the modern loss of respect, or rather the conviction that respect is due only where we admire or esteem, constitutes a clear symptom of the increasing depersonalization of public and social life.” (ibid.) Arendt also links respect to plurality and explains why it is not possible to forgive oneself. Our dependence on others is thus highlighted as is the importance of experience.

Apart from forgiveness, there is punishment which also attempts to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly (HC 241). Arendt classifies it (punishment) as an alternative to forgiveness. Therefore, in authentic political action, there should be forgiveness and alternatively, punishment. Both, she says, have a revelatory character (ibid.) in that acts that are forgiven are harmful, evil, or altogether criminal acts and acts that need to be punished also imply that it was an evil or criminal act.

#### 2.4.3 Unforgivable and Unpunishable

There are some acts, according to Arendt, which cannot be forgiven and cannot be punished (TOT 459). However, as has been seen, forgiveness is necessary for men to live together and for men to be able to act and to break a chain reaction of evil acts by introducing new acts. Meaning that forgiveness is necessary for men to live together in a common world. An unforgiveable crime to Arendt is the crime of wanting ‘to abolish this common world by destroying the realm of human affairs altogether’<sup>180</sup>. The attributes to the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany serve as her main example of such evils.

“Yet, in their effort to prove that everything is possible, totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive.

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<sup>180</sup> Kampowski. (2008). *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning*, pg. 40.

When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive.” (TOT 459)

The unforgivable and unpunishable is the ‘absolute evil,’ something which to her in traditional philosophy was something inconceivable (TOT 459). It is not easy to understand these phenomena because she says, something of this magnitude has never happened before. When she writes to Karl Jaspers on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1951, she says that “Evil has proved to be more radical than expected” (BPF 158). Her reasoning is that this evil<sup>181</sup> cannot be understood because there are no ‘humanly understandable, sinful motives’ that correspond to similar crimes. “Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know.” (TOT 459)

Evil of such a magnitude is inconceivable, so is it also unpunishable, for there can be no punishment that corresponds to unimaginable offences. She notes that, ‘men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable.’ (HC 241) Unforgivable and unpublishable offences, she says, ‘transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance’ (ibid.). By transcendent she means that this kind of crime (mass

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<sup>181</sup> The concept of evil, in this case radical evil, will be explained in depth in the next chapter. For purposes of this chapter, the radical evil that she refers to here is the elimination of the Jews as planned by the Third Reich and as described to be “The Final Solution” for Germany.

annihilation of human beings in the totalitarian regime) goes beyond vice on which account she classifies it as absolute evil (OR 83). Meaning that there is no root or base by which it can be measured or beyond which a man dare not go (HC 101). She says, “To put it another way, in granting pardon, it is the person<sup>182</sup> and not the crime that is forgiven; in rootless evil there is no person left whom one could ever forgive.” (RJ 95) To transcend that which is human or to go beyond vice, which is human, ought to be classified as inhuman. However, did Jesus of Nazareth not forgive the unpardonable?

## 2.5 Reflection on human action

An inquiry into the political significance of human action in as far as their ethical value is concerned, constitutes the next task. It is a difficult task because according to Arendt, these belong to the field of philosophy or metaphysics, both of which have ‘fallen into disrepute’ (LMT 11). Rather, in her opinion, philosophy is the ‘ability to think’ which to her is of greater importance. For her, it is through thinking that men should be able to tell right from wrong, thereby making it an exercise that all ought to be capable of. That is why she says that, “If the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to “demand” its exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may prove to be.” (LMT 422; JP 164; EU 13)

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<sup>182</sup> Arendt bestows upon the person the dignity of one who distinguishes himself by speech and that he remains one “to the extent that he is capable of such constitution ever again and anew” by which she implies his ability for thoughtfulness. (Arendt, H. (2003). *Responsibility and Judgement*. New York: Schocken Books pg. 95) Henceforth abbreviated to RJ.

What this implies is that if one thinks then they ought to be able to identify evil and good. She backs it up with Kant's writings on morality, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between knowing and thinking (LMT 164). Her assumption in as far as this lecture is concerned, is that 'one would need philosophy, the exercise of reason as the faculty of thought, to prevent evil' (ibid.). This only shows just how important the thinking faculty is to Arendt<sup>183</sup>.

When Arendt reported the trial of Adolf Eichmann for *The New Yorker*<sup>184</sup>, a head-on confrontation of thinking as a capacity for man and its consequences, became clearly evident. It is here that she arrives at definite conclusions that had been drawn up as arguments in *The Human Condition*. There she concludes; "The longer one listened to him (Eichmann), the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else." (EJ 49) If one cannot think then neither would they be able to tell right from wrong. Because of this, she again links the ability or inability to think with the problem of evil (EU 166).

If this is the case, she makes three main prepositions. In brief these include that first, the faculty of thinking should be ascribed to everybody. Second, due to Kant's "natural aversion"<sup>185</sup>, we cannot expect any moral propositions or commandments, no final code of conduct or declaration of what is good and what is evil from the thinking activity. Third, if thinking deals with invisibles, then it is out of order

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<sup>183</sup> Thinking will be tackled in the fourth chapter.

<sup>184</sup> This report was later published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil*.

<sup>185</sup> Here she is referring to Kant's claim that the mind has a natural aversion to doubt what one may have convinced themselves of originally (Kant, *Akademie Ausgabe*, vol. 18, nos. 5019 and 5036).

because we move in a world of appearances and the most radical experience of disappearance is death (ibid, pg. 166-167).

In response to the first preposition, Arendt claims that we, men, are what we have always been – ‘thinking beings’ (LMT 11). It is a capacity that she takes for granted in all thinking beings and that is probably why she is taken aback by Eichmann’s lack of it. In her opinion, thinking is a natural human ability and that men do more than just think. She says, “men have an inclination, perhaps a need, to think beyond the limitations of knowledge, to do more with this ability than use it as an instrument for knowing and doing.” (ibid., 12)

When it comes to the second proposition, she says,

“if Kant is right and the faculty of thought has a "natural aversion" against accepting its own results as "solid axioms" then we cannot expect any moral propositions or commandments, no final code of conduct from the thinking activity, least of all a new and now allegedly final definition of what is good and what is evil.” (RJ 167)

In other words, a given code of conduct or a final definition of what is good or bad cannot possibly come up from the thinking activity since we have the natural aversion not to accept them. She claims that not even the ‘professional thinkers’ have been able to do so (RJ 167). Her reasoning is that it is not possible because thinking changes with life experiences. Also, to depend on the thinking activity and then doubt it, cannot result in a code of conduct nor a final definition. She is also against the self being the ultimate standard of moral conduct. Nevertheless, in solitude i.e. on an individual basis, she holds this may be so. Her argument is that the will is fully in the power of the individual (LMW 88) hence, “The concern with self as the ultimate standard of

moral conduct exists of course only in solitude. Its demonstrable validity is found in the general formula ‘It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.’” (EU 100)

Analytically, this is in relation to the thinking man who has to face himself and to also live with himself. He faces himself in solitude, when he is alone. It is then that the thinking man must be in agreement with him and himself. It is when these two are at odds that she quotes Socrates: “It is better to be at odds with the whole world than being one to be at odds with myself” (EU 102). Rather, she holds that essential moral rules upon which all men agree do exist “either because God told them so or because they can be derived from the nature of man” (ibid.).

Arendt prefers to talk about judgements which result from thinking. Judgements can be personal and subjective. She wrote extensively about this in *The life of the Mind / Thinking* (1978). There, she says that the faculty of judgment, may with some reason be called “the most political of man’s mental abilities” (LMT 192). This is how she describes judgement:

“The faculty of judging particulars (as brought to light by Kant), the ability to say “this is wrong,” “this is beautiful,” and so on, is not the same as the faculty of thinking. Thinking deals with invisibles, with representations of things that are absent; judging always concerns particulars and things close at hand. But the two are interrelated...” (LMT 192-193)

At the end of the paragraph above, the third proposition mentioned earlier is implied. She distinguishes between thinking and judging but maintains that they are interrelated. Thinking deals with invisibles and so she questions the connection between ability or inability to think and the problem of evil since men move in a world of appearances. She asks

how anything relevant for the world we live in can ‘arise out of so result less an enterprise’ (EU 167).

Now, judgement is not knowledge. Judgement, rather, is a ‘manifestation of the wind of thought,’ ‘the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly’ (LMT 193). This manifestation is what ‘may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self.’ (ibid.) Her point here is that one has got to think in order to do good or to act morally. So, this would mean that if men thought more, there would be less evil. Are men not thinking as they can or should be? All men think, make judgements and make use of reason, so why is it that they still perform evil acts? To be able to address these questions, judgement, freedom and will need to be understood and put in perspective according to Arendt’s understanding of these concepts in relation to politics. Hence a slight yet relevant deviation.

### 2.5.1 Freedom and political action

It would be best to begin with Arendt’s description of the ‘pre-philosophic’<sup>186</sup> meaning, use and understanding of freedom wherefrom its authentic meaning is derived. It begins in Greek and Roman antiquity where freedom was an exclusively political concept (BPF 157). It was applied to men who were available to appear in the public space where they distinguished themselves. She explains that in both Greek and Latin translation, the word ‘to act’ covered beginning, leading, ruling such that being free and the capacity to begin something new coincided or were at the most interconnected. In the case of the Greeks, ‘Freedom, as we would say today<sup>187</sup>, was experienced in spontaneity.’ (ibid., 166) Meaning that one needed to be able to be spontaneous so as to

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<sup>186</sup> Pre-Socratic times up until Platinus. (BPF 145)

<sup>187</sup> The ability to do what and as we please — as a phenomenon of the will. (BPF 151)

experience freedom. For the Romans, freedom was connected to the beginning of Roman history and to the founding and therefore beginning of Rome as a city (ibid.).

Founding was done by men of the *polis* who came together. If they were men of the *polis* they each had their respective established households. These equals came together to begin something new by acting. In accordance with her explanation, in ancient Greece, only leaders were able to begin something new having already taken care of their households and thus being ‘above’ having to cater for the necessities of life<sup>188</sup>. Instead, leaders or those who stepped out into the public space so to speak, were ‘rulers among rulers, moving among their peers’ (BPF 166). Here, Arendt holds that this could only be done with the help of others and not in isolation for one had to be amongst them. In both cases, the origin of freedom was exclusively political and had nothing to do with philosophy as shall consequently be expounded.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> The necessities of life were cared for through labour which was a task for slaves. This is how she describes it: “To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled. Thus, within the realm of the household, freedom did not exist, for the household head, its ruler, was considered to be free only in so far as he had the power to leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals.” (HC 32) More on this is described at length in Chapter III of *The Human Condition*.

Also refer to page 148 of *Between Past and Future*.

<sup>189</sup> It has already been seen how ‘the way of life chosen by the philosopher was understood in opposition to the βίος πολιτικός, the political way of life’ (BPF 157). Meaning that the life of the philosopher was on a different plane that had more to do with contemplation or the *vita contemplativa* as opposed to action or the *vita activa* (BPF 151; HC 13, 14, 16, 302). She holds that in ancient pre-Socratic philosophy, philosophers were devoted to inquiry and higher eternal things as opposed to a craving for an active life in public space.

She also claims that historically, freedom was never an issue making ‘its first appearance in our philosophical tradition’ with the religious conversions of Saint Paul and Saint Augustine (BPF 145, 157, 158, 167). Instead, freedom was always known in the political realm and only seldom became ‘the direct aim of political action’ (ibid., 146) as shall be seen. In other words, men who were free were men who were active in the public space. As Arendt herself implies, freedom is an attribute of action (ibid., 155).

Arendt gives an in-depth description of the understanding of freedom in relation to action in an article entitled ‘What is Freedom?’ that was published in *Between Past and Future*. Basically, the way Arendt sees it, free action should not be under the dictates of will nor of the intellect, much as both are necessary for the execution of any goal. Rather, if action is really free as in authentic politics it should be, then it transcends both aims and/or motives as well as the fact that it ought to be unpredictable. This is because, for an act to be free, there should be no determining factors. Rather, in free political action, the aim varies depending on the varying circumstances in any given action and the resulting counter reactions which cannot or should not be known.

In the same line, the command of the will initiates action while the judgement of the intellect precedes it (BPF 152). That is why she says, “It is the will, (...), which in a sense creates the *person* that can be blamed or praised and anyhow held responsible not merely for its actions but for its whole ‘Being,’ its *character*.” (LMT 214-215) In other words, it is the person that takes responsibility.

For Arendt, action itself springs from so-called ‘principles’ (BPF 152). These ‘principles’ can only be manifested in actions while they last, meaning that they coincide with the performing act (BPF 152). This

characteristic is proper of all her other ‘authentic’ political elements<sup>190</sup>. The principles remain constant in value and she compares them to Montesquieu’s virtues (ibid.). When or if these principles (or virtues) are actualised, they coincide with freedom or, put differently, that is when freedom appears. This is why she says, “Men *are* free – as distinguished from their possessing the gift of freedom – as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same” (ibid., 153) and “The *raison d’être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action.” (ibid., 146) This is also why freedom only seldom became ‘the direct aim of political action’ (ibid., 146) because freedom was there at the same time as action. Where there was political action, there was freedom and vice versa.

Therefore, the original field of freedom as given in human experiences, is in the realm of politics and human affairs in general and not in the inward domain of the will (BPF 145). Instead, such an understanding of it has obscured it. By saying this, she distinguishes it from external or physical freedom because being internal, ‘it remains without outer manifestations and hence is by definition politically irrelevant’ (BPF 146). Besides, she claims, ‘We first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves.’ (ibid., 148) The issue of plurality and equality is key in this as can be seen from the quote below;

“Freedom (...) needed the company of other men who were in the same state, and it needed a common public space to meet them – a politically organised world, in other words, into which each of the free men could insert himself by word and deed.” (BPF 148)

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<sup>190</sup> More on this was seen in a subsection of Section 2.3 entitled Performance as an actuality.

She is also quick to clarify that not all forms of men meeting in public spaces are characterised by freedom (ibid. 148 & 154). Rather, it must be a *polis* of a nature as described previously, that they form by being together not for reasons of survival nor necessarily, because then their actions may not be characterised as free actions. This is why for her, ‘freedom as a demonstrable fact and politics coincide’ and are compatible (BPF 149) and must necessarily go together<sup>191</sup>.

Freedom, therefore, in relation to politics is primarily experienced in action which she claims is not a phenomenon of the will (ibid., 151) as is the interpretation and modern day understanding of it.

“Because of the philosophic shift from action to will-power, from freedom as a state of being manifest in action to the *liberum arbitrium*, the ideal of freedom ceased to be virtuosity in the sense we mentioned before and became sovereignty, the ideal of a free will, independent from others and eventually prevailing against them.” (BPF 163)

If the political is understood in the sense of the *polis*, its end she claims

“would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear. The polis is the realm where freedom is a worldly reality, tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which are talked about, remembered, and turned into stories before they are finally incorporated into the great storybook of human history” (BPF 154-155)

Further, that ‘whatever occurs in this space of appearance is political by definition, even when it is not a direct product of action’ (ibid.). Emphasis here is placed on the fact that there are external manifestations

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<sup>191</sup> As has been seen, she claims that in the modern age these have been separated.

as opposed to the acts of the mind or the will. This is what she means when she says that the actions ‘keep in existence’. The existence may also be verbal and not necessarily physical since she says that the events are ‘talked about’. The important thing is that provided it happens in this space, then it is political. This is not true of acts of the mind which happen and remain inside the mind and hidden from spectators.

When it comes to the mind, Arendt explains the Augustinian conflict within the soul itself as discovered by Paul<sup>192</sup>, saying that it had ‘no relation to politics’ (BPF 158). Her claim is that in antiquity, this conflict within the will itself, was ‘characteristic of thought’ (BPF 158) meaning that this is proper to all who engage in thinking. She explains that willing in solitude is always *velle* and *nolle*, to will and not to will at the same time. She says, “the faculty of will and will-power in and by itself, unconnected with any other faculties, is an essentially non-political and even anti-political capacity” (BPF 164).

Rather, after Paul ‘discovered’ freedom, she says, it became “one of the chief problems of philosophy when it was experienced as something occurring in the intercourse between me and myself, and outside of the intercourse between men” (BPF 158) when “free will and freedom became synonymous notions” (ibid.). Basically, for Arendt, freedom is not something to be experienced in solitude. What philosophers discovered is that I-will and I-can are two different things (*non hoc est velle, quod posse*) (ibid.) as well as the possible conflict between the two. She says,

“Had ancient philosophy known of a possible conflict between what I can and what I will, it would certainly have understood

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<sup>192</sup> Augustine’s conflict “within the soul itself was utterly unknown, for the fight in which he had become engaged was not between ...two different human faculties, but it was a conflict within the will itself.” (BPF 158)

the phenomenon of freedom as an inherent quality of the I-can, or it might conceivably have defined it as the coincidence of I-will and I-can” (BPF 159)

Today it is understood that only where I-will and the I-can coincide does freedom come to pass (ibid.). In antiquity, this was referred to as self-control. But, Arendt’s argument is that, originally in antiquity, freedom was an exclusively political concept experienced in association with others. The strictly political notion of free-will as in antiquity did not have this interior conflict. To her, the modern ‘philosophical’ concept of political freedom, is inadequate for political purposes (BPF 160-161). That is why she says, “the moment men *willed* freedom, they lost their capacity to *be* free.” (BPF 162)

Another reason why political freedom and action have been ill understood, she says, is because they have been separated (BPF 149) and yet they ought to go together. Her last work was dedicated to address just the faculty of the mind. It consists of three parts, the third highlighted judgement but she died before she was able to write it. To her, the life of the mind consists of thinking, willing and judging all of which to her are the three basic mental activities that cover the whole range of human experience. Her emphasis was on the importance of not seeing them in isolation much as they are autonomous (LMT 69, 70) but together.

Arendt acknowledges the influence that thought has on action and at the same time maintains that thought in itself is also an action. This is why she says, that thought is both possible and actual. “Thought, (...) is still possible, and no doubt actual, wherever men live under the conditions of political freedom.” (HC 324)

### 2.5.2 Human action, will and freedom

Having seen that freedom is not to be experienced in solitude, hence relating it to plurality, Arendt closely relates freedom to her concept of natality, beginning with Augustine. According to him, she says, man is free because ‘he is a beginning’ and because he can begin (BPF 167). She herself seconds and maintains this idea. As has been seen, for her, ‘to be human and to be free are one and the same.’ (BPF 167) As was also seen previously, to be free is to act. This implies therefore, that to be human is to act. Arendt actually says that man was created ‘in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom’ (ibid.).

But, action is unpredictable with boundless consequences such that the original author of the action can never really be known. Men act together in a *polis* as a plurality yet as individuals and more importantly, they act freely. Each act is a new act and thus a beginning of something new as was seen is the concept of natality. Beginning and spontaneity<sup>193</sup> are closely linked to natality because freedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin (TOT 473). She explains it thus;

“Freedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin, just as freedom as a political reality is identical with a space of movement between men. Over the beginning, no logic, no cogent deduction can have any power, because its chain presupposes, in the form of a premise, the beginning.” (TOT 473)

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<sup>193</sup> According to Formoso, P. (2007), “Spontaneity is for Arendt the mere possibility of doing something that cannot be simply and completely explained on the basis of reactions to the environment and preceding events.” (Formoso, P., (2007) “Is Radical Evil Banal? Is Banal Evil Radical?” in *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 33 no 6, pgs. 717–735. SAGE Publications)

What she highlights is that freedom is an inner capacity that is identical with the capacity to begin. Beginning results in an action so new, that there was nothing before it. Arendt distinguishes between absolute and relative beginnings as well as there being a difference between the *initium* of Man as well as the *principium* of Heaven and Earth (LSA 55, 56, 75; HC 97; LMW 110). This distinction is important because reference to the *initium* of man makes him a temporal being such that Arendt's action theory, as a new beginning, is always a new beginning in time<sup>194</sup>. This gives action a definite beginning and time span as well as having other implications on natality.

Beginning something that is completely new has a problem – “a problem because beginning's very nature is to carry in itself an element of complete arbitrariness.” (LMW 207) In other words, to begin something for the first time means it was not before. If it was not before then there is nothing to start off with, meaning that “there is nothing left for the ‘beginner’ to hold on to” should he want to begin (ibid. 208). Arendt refers to this as ‘absolute beginning—*creatio ex nihilo*’ (ibid.). It “abolishes the sequence of temporality” (ibid.). Absolute beginning is not of interest to this work but only beginning within temporality. When Arendt talks about action it is always as a reaction to a prior action and so on *ad infinitum*. In Arendt's words, “It is in the nature of beginning that something new was created but not which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before.” (HC 177-178). The will on the other hand, has nothing to explain its initiative. In the same way, it has been said that beginning something completely new is not caused.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Kampowski, S. (2008) *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning*, pg. 227.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. 152.

Kampowski also holds that with Arendt, “action, as a new beginning, is always a new beginning in time” (Ibid., 227) as does Bradford<sup>196</sup>.

Arendt’s claim is that men are creative and “they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it” (TOT 458). To her, this ability or freedom to act is more authentic when it arises politically among men in the *polis*. In fact, she says that human actions are so, unforeseeable and unpredictable that one ought “to be prepared for and to expect ‘miracles’ in the political realm” (BPF 170). Since human processes are constantly interrupted by the *initium* of man in as far as he is an acting being (BPF 170), so is the unpredictability and unforeseen nature of action constantly ongoing for as long as men continue to act. Natality is therefore part and parcel of authentic political action.

This is why, for Arendt, beginning takes on a central position in political action. For her, the birth of men implies new beginnings. How the continuity of these beginnings coincides with each new birth<sup>197</sup>, “guarantees a history that can never end because it is the history of beings whose essence is beginning” (TOT 466; EU 321). She also says that “If the essence of all, and in particular of political action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action” (EU 321-322)

For her, knowing and doing ought to go together because, ‘Wherever knowing and doing have parted company, the space of freedom is lost.’

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<sup>196</sup> Bradshaw also pointed out that thinking must be situated in a temporal, human context, claiming that for Arendt, “the experience of thinking is a ‘timeless’ one, but the object towards which thought moves is not timeless, but temporal.” (Bradshaw, L. (1989) *Acting and Thinking*, pg. 110). This will be of greater relevance in chapter 4.

<sup>197</sup> ‘If action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualisation of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among my equals.’ (HC 178)

(OR 268) Only humans are free beings who know and do since, as Arendt also agrees, the will initiates action. To eliminate this freedom is to eliminate that which is intrinsically human. Arendt goes on at length describing in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and in *On Revolution* how in the concentration camps, it was shown that, 'human beings can be transformed into specimen of the human animal' (OR 455) meaning, they were turned into acting beings who did not act spontaneously. Instead, the infinite plurality of men "acted as if all of humanity were just one individual" (OR 438). The factor of natality was gone in the concentration camps. Man's nature is only human insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming man. For this, man needs to be able to act freely and at will and therefore spontaneously. Once this is taken away, so is man's possibility of spontaneity, which she says, 'is an expression of human behaviour' (ibid.).

In an effort to totally dominate humans, the Nazis or those running a totalitarian type of government, tried to eliminate or 'kill' this human spontaneity 'for to destroy individuality is to destroy spontaneity, man's power to begin something new out of his own resources, something that cannot be explained on the basis of reactions to environment and events.' (TOT 455). They strived to organise the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings such that their reactions could be predicted with certainty as if they were all the same. This is because she says, "they were guided by the very realistic understanding that freedom resides in the human capacities of action and thought" (TOT 502) and that it "is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other." (TOT 438) The result was an animal-like behaviour due to lack of individuality and spontaneity. Reactions were identical to all which can only be the case if reactions are instinctual, not personal, and not thought through. This is

not free action and therefore neither can it be human. In other words, the ‘attempt to transform human nature itself’ (TOT 458) is no easy task<sup>198</sup>.

In the strict sense, for Arendt, spontaneity can never be entirely eliminated under normal circumstances insofar as it is connected not only with human freedom but with life itself (TOT 455; EU 304). This explains how some of the victims were able to survive. It was only in concentration camps where the appropriate conditions – so to speak, were provided and such experiments were at all possible. In fact, she says, “these camps are the true central institution of totalitarian organisational power” (TOT 438). It was there that the forms of human differentiation, along with the social space or polis in which to enact our differences, were repressed making it possible to subdue spontaneity. It was in this that they were able to totally dominate man. By so doing, they inhibited any free or spontaneous never-ending chain of reactions.

Hence, for Arendt, ‘To the question of politics, the problem of freedom is crucial’ (BPF 145). This is why she states, “What usually remains intact in the epochs of petrification and foreordained doom is the faculty of freedom itself” (TOT 468; LMW 217). In the realm of politics, freedom is likely to be destroyed once it loses its restricting limitations which protect its boundaries, thereby becoming ‘helpless, defenseless’ (BPF 97). It is this that the Nazis did by killing spontaneity and thus resulting in men being superfluous. Still this was no easy task as was seen because the ‘sheer capacity’ to react or begin something new was never really removed and actually ‘remained intact’ (ibid.). This is because, “the source of freedom remains present even when political life has become petrified and political action impotent to interrupt automatic processes” (BPF 269, 171) meaning that the source itself cannot be

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<sup>198</sup> The means employed to do so as attempted in concentration camps are well known and documented in numerous publications not relevant here.

destroyed without destroying man if we take into account the fact that 'man is a beginning and a beginner' (BPF 170).

Man may be the beginner of action, starting something new each time he acts, but one may argue that, man never remains the master of his actions since there is this unending chain of unpredictable reactions that inevitably follow. In her opinion, this is what the 'great tradition of Western thought' does. It condemns action,

"because its results fall into a predetermined net of relationships, invariably dragging the agent with them, who seems to forfeit his freedom the very moment he makes use of it. The only salvation from this kind of freedom seems to lie in non-acting, in abstention from the whole realm of human affairs as the only means to safeguard one's sovereignty and integrity as a person." (HC 234)

The error here, she says lies in the 'identification of sovereignty with freedom' (HC 234) and to deny the fact that men and not just one man inhabit the earth i.e. the very condition of plurality. If each man were to remain master of each of his acts, it would mean that he is sovereign to others. This goes against the human condition of plurality as has just been seen and would require one to deny reality. This would lead to one living in an imaginary world where others simply do not exist (HC 234), precisely the kind of world that was constructed in the concentration camps.

Basically, the agent, or originator of the act, wills his action. If the will is separated from freedom, one is forced to see action in a distorted manner. For example, she explains that the chain reaction would lead one to think that freedom has been lost since there is no longer any

control over the reactions caused by the original agent.<sup>199</sup> For Kant this is also so, as Arendt explains, “Once a human act leaves the subjective sphere, which is man's sphere of freedom, it enters the objective sphere, which is the sphere of causality, and loses its element of freedom.” (EU 171) This cannot be the case because then this implies that man is not free and that he is doomed to the fate of reactions that follow his actions. This is how she puts it;

“to condemn action, the spontaneous beginning of something new, because its results fall into a predetermined net of relationships, invariably dragging the agent with them, who seems to forfeit his freedom the very moment he makes use of it. The only salvation from this kind of freedom seems to lie in non-acting, in abstention from the whole realm of human affairs as the only means to safeguard one's sovereignty and integrity as a person.” (HC 234)

Action, Arendt says, would thus have to be banned since it is so unpredictable and yet this cannot be the case because it would result in

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<sup>199</sup> “For Kant, man has the possibility, based in the freedom of his good will, to determine his own actions; the actions themselves, however, are subject to nature's law of causality, a sphere essentially alien to man. Once a human act leaves the subjective sphere, which is man's sphere of freedom, it enters the objective sphere, which is the sphere of causality, and loses its element of freedom. Man, who is free in himself, is nonetheless hopelessly at the mercy of the workings of a natural world alien to him, of a fate opposing him and destroying his freedom.” (EU 171)

Another mistaken view of the modern age she describes by saying, “Now, where life is at stake all action is by definition under the sway of necessity, and the power realm to take care of life's necessities is the gigantic and still increasing sphere of social and economic life whose administration has overshadowed the political realm ever since the beginning of the modern age.” (BPF 155)

‘disastrous consequences’ (HC 234) because not to act is not to be free which is and to be human.

Neither the philosophical concept of freedom as it first arose in late antiquity, nor the Christian nor modern notion of free-will have any ground in political experience (BPF 157). There is no way in which they can form part of the political experience because, for her as seen previously, plurality is a concept that is inherently political. Meaning that it should be experienced in association with others and not just ‘in intercourse with one’s self’ (ibid.). As opposed to this understanding of freedom, the notion of free-will is a phenomenon that does not require the presence of others since it happens within the individual. In the absence of others, for Arendt, this makes it apolitical.

All in all, it has been possible to see and analyse Arendt’s man as a political acting being. At the heart of her political thought, it has been possible to identify more than just a reaction to Europe’s political and social crises. Rather, there is true concern for the world and what has happened to it and well as what might happen to it depending on our actions. Arendt analysed the 20<sup>th</sup> Century crises using the very same anthropological categories identified in the first chapter in an attempt to reconcile herself to these events by putting them in context and applying them to the political man. Arendt’s vision of man as a political being from the point of view of his human condition, as has been expounded in this chapter, has been seriously compromised by history and the experience of evil in the Nazi regime. This now leads to the study of the following chapters.



## Chapter 3: From Radical Evil to Banality of Evil

### 3.1 Facing Evil

As is commonly known, Arendt's understanding of the concept of evil has a lot to do with the Jewish experience during the twentieth century. In a nutshell, the Jews had been forced into emigration and pogroms in Eastern Europe and Russia. Then, with World War II came the deportations and Ghettos and eventually, the gas chambers were '*the final solution*'<sup>200</sup> in as far as Hitler was concerned. Thus, before too long, it became quite clear what the Nazi's agenda was. The idea itself was hard to fathom let alone to accept. Men, including the Jews themselves, shied away from facing this unpleasant and tragic reality head-on and so looked for other indirect ways of dealing with it.

Arendt had a great distaste for such shying away from reality as is evident in her writings. For example, after the second World War, in 1945, she writes a review of "The Devil's Share" written by Denis de Rougemont<sup>201</sup>. She is disappointed by Rougemont's 'immaturity' and 'basic confusion of the whole approach' (EU 134) and chides him for fleeing from the reality of evil and of not addressing it as it is. She says,

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<sup>200</sup> A full account of the process of this can be read in Reitlinger, G. (1968), *The Final Solution*.

<sup>201</sup> It is an article that he had published in *Partisan Review*, XII/2, 1945.

“But instead of facing the music of man’s genuine capacity for evil and analysing the nature of man, he in turn ventures into a flight from reality and writes on the nature of the Devil, thereby, despite all dialectics, evading the responsibility of man for his deeds.” (EU 134)

She goes on to accuse him of ‘metaphysical opportunism’ and of escaping ‘from reality into a cosmic fight’ (TOT 135) – two of her great dislikes and qualities that she often shunned. She admired people who had the courage to face reality as she herself did. Instead, several Jews, she claims, took refuge from the real (Jewish) problem when they indulged in art, being only concerned with preservation<sup>202</sup>. A number of the Jews found it easier to dedicate themselves to art instead of addressing the issue head-on<sup>203</sup>. They concerned themselves with it as a

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<sup>202</sup> The possibility of being forgotten and being wiped off the face of the earth, is for the Jews, one of the greatest horrors that could occur. This is because the Jews are ‘a chosen race’ and they understand themselves to have a role to play in the world until the end of time. This could explain their turning to activities of preservation through art and literature. Turning to the theatres was not something that was exclusively Jewish she admits (JP 117). Nevertheless, the Jews attempted different ways of self-preservation in ways that would outlive them as mortal beings. In this way they could outlive themselves and the memory of them would live on for generations. Unfortunately, such individual achievements of works of art by the Jews found no reception in the German and also not the Jewish circles. Not in German circles for obvious reasons but also not in the Jewish ones because there was as yet, according to Arendt, no Jewish audience cultured enough to receive or value them. Examples of such Jews that she mentions are Franz Kafka (EU 75), Charlie Chaplin, Rosa Luxemburg as well as several others that she writes about in *Men in Dark Times* as well as in *Essays in Understanding*.

<sup>203</sup> Here I would like to note that Arendt was not against art as can be seen in her writings in *Between Past and Future*. She herself loved poetry and wrote several poems. Her point is that the Jewish problem needed to be addressed directly by facing the facts (EU 197–198), while art ought to be kept in its right place.

way to kind of leave a mark behind given that they were sitting ducks anyway and might never be remembered.

Arendt herself was more courageous and preferred to face the reality of evil squarely and head-on. This can be seen from the fact that she got actively involved in the Zionist organisation in France (EU 12). In as far as she was concerned, “If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of Rights of Man, or whatever.” (EU 12). In her attempt to do this, she did some illegal work in the German Zionist Organisation in France even if she herself was not officially associated with the Zionists<sup>204</sup>.

Her written articles and later writings are further proof of her facing the problem that was at hand. To begin with, she wrote the book, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, which she finished when she left Germany (She left Germany in 1933 but the book was first published in 1958). She says that, “I wrote it with the idea, ‘I want to understand.’ I wasn’t discussing my personal problems as a Jew. But now, belonging to Judaism had become my own problem, and my own problem was political. Purely political!” (EU 12). Her so called ‘political’ intervention was closely tied to her condition of being a Jew and to the sufferings of the Jewish people of the twentieth century. She did not remain indifferent to it.

Other writings in relation to this include her 1946 review of *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime Against the Jewish People* and later in 1951 her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she does not shy away from giving a graphic and in-depth analysis of what really took place;

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<sup>204</sup> Young-Bruehl, E., (1982) *Hannah Arendt For Love of the World*, pg. 105.

‘The facts are: that six million Jews, six million human beings, were helplessly, and in most cases unsuspectingly, dragged to their deaths. The method employed was that of accumulated terror. First came calculated neglect, deprivation, and shame, when the weak in body died together with those strong and defiant enough to take their own lives. Second came outright starvation, combined with forced labour, when people died by the thousands but at different intervals of time, according to their stamina. Last came the death factories – and they all died together, the young and the old, the weak and the strong, the sick and the healthy; not as people, not as men and women, children and adults, boys and girls, not as good and bad, beautiful and ugly – but brought down to the lowest common denominator of organic life itself, plunged into the darkest and deepest abyss of primal equality, like cattle, like matter, like things that had neither body nor soul, nor even a physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal.’ (EU 198)

This is the evil that no one was ready to face nor to fathom as a reality. No one was able to do so because to Arendt, this phenomenon was “Beyond the capacities of human comprehension.” (EU 198) and that it “explodes the limits of the law” (AJC 54). Bernstein, for example, claims that Arendt “would agree with Levinas’s characterisation of evil as an excess that cannot be integrated into our normal categories of understanding and reason.”<sup>205</sup> This could probably explain why there was such reluctance and hesitancy to face it – its unfathomable magnitude.

Nevertheless, she makes clear that the idea behind and the root of such can only be evil. In fact, she had warned that, “the problem of evil will

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<sup>205</sup> Bernstein, R., (2002). *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*. UK, USA: Polity Press, pg. 213.

be the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life in Europe—as death became the fundamental problem after the last war” (EU 134) as indeed it has turned out to be even today.

### 3.1.1 The concept of evil

In her dissertation and therefore her earliest writing, Arendt already brings up the concept of evil by explaining it as she understands it from the study of the writings of Augustine. There she brings up the issue of how he equates Being with the universe (LSA 60). Arendt, even in her later writings, will always appreciate the need for essence and existence to coincide<sup>206</sup>. This is an outlook that she maintains throughout her later years and one could argue that this is due to the influence from Heidegger.<sup>207</sup>

At this stage of her early career in philosophy, she gives Augustine’s interpretation of life, insofar as ‘it is believed to be eternal’, to ‘possess the same character of original simultaneity as Being (the universe)<sup>208</sup>. i.e. life and Being coincide, so to speak. Saint Augustine agrees with the Greek definition of being and he serves as an authority for Arendt. She explains that, “Being is for Augustine, as it was for the Greeks, the everlasting, forever lawful structure and the harmony of all the parts of the universe.” (LSA 61)

Her question that follows from this is that since God created all things, how could God have created evil? (LSA 60) There are wicked men, and God created them. How is this so? She interprets Augustine to explain it thus: “that person is wicked who tries in vain to escape the

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<sup>206</sup> This was discussed in greater detail at the end of chapter 2. (TOT 466; EU 321)

<sup>207</sup> The arguments for this do not form part of the necessary elements of this thesis.

<sup>208</sup> Here she quotes from his *Confessions* XI, 28, 38.

predetermined harmony of the whole” (LSA 61) However, this is but a description of an evil person. Of interest is the concept of evil itself according to Arendt.

Still in the same book at that stage of her philosophical career, she says that what results in man’s being, whether good or evil, is “another’s tongue” (*aliena lingua*) that is outside of man and goes against his conscience (LSA 84). She quotes Augustine and seems to agree with him where he says that an evil conscience cannot flee from itself (LSA 84) and that in fact, it has nowhere to go as Socrates made clear in his own dialogues. Her explanation is that it has no place to go to since the very world to which we would flee, is the same world of which we are accused by conscience (LSA 84). She goes further to say, “In the testimony of conscience, God is the only possible judge of good and evil” (ibid.). This conclusion is probably not self-drawn but could be from Augustine<sup>209</sup>. Nevertheless, it is interesting to point out that she herself begins to try to understand the complex nature of good and evil.

By the time she writes *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her concept of evil has seemingly revolved to another level. Its use at the beginning is merely descriptive. She uses it to refer to non-honourable deeds and events such as the struggle and partition of Africa (TOT 147),

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<sup>209</sup> She explains Augustine’s position on evil using several of his writings. His stand is well brought out in the Part II of her book, *Love and Saint Augustine*, where she quotes from several of his writings. (LSA 84-85) Arendt’s Augustinian interpretation of conscience comes out clearly. First, that conscience is of God and that it refers back directly to the Creator. It puts man in God’s presence. Second is that man hears what he is, not from his conscience but, from an alien tongue which determines man’s being as either good or evil. Therefore, the alien tongue is not that of the law of God. Third, conscience, which is within us, speaks against this foreign tongue in such a way that the person addressed cannot escape or flee from it. Forth, God is the only possible judge of good and evil.

imperialism (TOT 150, 155), colonialism (TOT 271), being Jewish (TOT 354), etc.

Towards the end of the book, however, she begins to talk about *radical* evil. The first time she brings it up is in the following paragraph;

“It is the appearance of some radical evil, previously unknown to us, that puts an end to the notion of developments and transformations of qualities. Here, there are neither political nor historical nor simply moral standards but, at the most, the realization that something seems to be involved in modern politics that actually should never be involved in politics as we used to understand it, namely all or nothing—all, and that is an undetermined infinity of forms of human living-together, or nothing, for a victory of the concentration-camp system would mean the same inexorable doom for human beings as the use of the hydrogen bomb would mean the doom of the human race.” (TOT 443)

The radical evil that she is referring to in the paragraph above is the intention to eliminate the Jewish race in Europe, also referred to as ‘the final solution’<sup>210</sup> (TOT xxxiii, 443) as described at the very beginning of this chapter. This is also what Bernstein understands Arendt to mean by radical evil<sup>211</sup>. The term radical comes from the fact that this is an evil ‘previously unknown to us’ and how the fulfilment of this evil would mean ‘inexorable doom for human beings.’ She also claims that this kind of evil is new to modern politics.

As can be seen from above, Arendt’s interest in the concept of evil went

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<sup>210</sup> Arendt quotes from a different edition: Reitlinger, G., *The Final Solution*, 1953; *The SS-Alibi of a Nation*, London, 1956.

<sup>211</sup> Bernstein, R. (2002). *Radical Evil*, pg. 209-210.

along with her in all her writings. She was interested in it as she herself admits in the answers to Questions that were submitted by Samuel Grafton, who said he had been commissioned to do a study of the immensely interesting reaction caused by her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. There she admits that “I have been thinking for many years, or to be specific thirty years about the nature of evil.” (JW 475). Her answers therefore are not just off the cuff but thought through after several years of contemplation.

Before going further, it is important to note that radical evil is not wickedness and Arendt differentiates between the two;

“Wickedness is always selfish which is precisely what binds it to others. It is never radical because it always arises from motives, meaning, it does not have its own source/root. Wickedness directly corresponds to the amount and quality of human Good” (My translation of original text which appears in footnote below.)<sup>212</sup>

What Arendt is affirming at this stage is that unlike evil, wickedness has no root, but it arises from motives. It was shown that radical evil does not need a motive as in the case of Eichmann and it is the concept of radical evil that is of interest to this study. It is the next task and the forms the main topic of interest for this chapter.

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<sup>212</sup> The original text was in German; “Die Schlechtigkeit ist immer selbstisch und bleibt gerade dadurch an Andere gebunden; sie ist nie radikal, weil sie immer Motiven entspringt, also keinen eigenen Ursprung hat. Die Schlechtigkeit entspricht genau in Maß und Qualität der menschlichen Güte” (*Denktagebuch*, Heft VI, Sept 1951, [5] pg. 128).

### 3.2 Radical evil

Radical comes from the Latin *radicalis*, *radix*, *radic-* which means root. Thus, to go to the root is to go to the very heart. To alter man at this level is to tamper with his very human condition and thus with man *qua* man and therefore at an essential and existential level.

For Arendt, the term radical evil is initially used to depict an evil which is beyond human conception.<sup>213</sup> She attributes the coinage of the term to Kant<sup>214</sup>, who she says, was the only philosopher who suspected that it existed (TOT 459) even though he explained it to be “perverted ill will” explainable in ‘comprehensible motives’.

“It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of a "radical evil," and this is true both for Christian theology, ..., as well as for Kant, the only philosopher who, in the word he coined for it, at least must have suspected the existence of this evil even though he

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<sup>213</sup> Bernstein suggests that Arendt also uses the term radical because leaders think they are omnipotent and rival God who created a plurality of human beings (Bernstein, R. (2002). *Radical Evil*). It is true that in a totalitarian regime, one man claims total power as did Adolf Hitler, for example. For one individual to claim absolute power goes against the human condition of pluralism (TOT 438). More on this is elaborated in subsection 2.4.2 of this work. I would classify this as radical evil only in so far as omnipotence of a man goes against plurality and therefore against the human condition. Likewise, for Arendt, the radical goes against more than just the aspect of plurality.

<sup>214</sup> Kant describes the term *Radikal Böse* (German for radical evil) in his book, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (Kant, E. (1793). *Die Religion innerhalb der blossen Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner). For a discussion of radical evil in Kant see Allen Wood, *The Evil in Human Nature*, and Ingolf Dalberg, *Radical Evil and Human Freedom*, pg. 58-78, both in *Kant's Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Critical Guide*, ed. Gordon Michalson, (2014) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

immediately rationalised it in the concept of a "perverted ill will" that could be explained by comprehensible motives. Therefore, we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality and breaks down all standards we know. There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous." (TOT 459)

To better understand how this is possible, it is important not to confuse man's capacity for evil with the problem of evil as such. This was the case of Rougemont in his book *The Devil's Share*, 1945 who she says,

"instead of facing the music of man's genuine capacity for evil and analysing the nature of man, he in turn ventures into a flight from reality and writes on the nature of the Devil, thereby, despite all dialectics, evading the responsibility of man for his deeds." (EU 134)

Introducing the Devil in all this as an explanation, is a phenomenon that Arendt describes as a 'flight from reality' since the Devil for her 'is nothing but a personification of Nothingness'<sup>215</sup> (ibid.) and nothing is not an answer.

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<sup>215</sup> She actually refers to Heidegger's nothingness. (EU 134)

When Kant (2001) talks about radical evil<sup>216</sup>, for example in his book, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, he refers to a propensity to moral evil that is innate in the agent. He also explains it to originate from human beings who “mutually corrupt one another’s moral predispositions” “as soon as he is among human beings”<sup>217</sup> claiming that it “suffices that they are there”<sup>218</sup>. He also claims that humanity has a “natural propensity to evil” and that “since it must nevertheless always come about through one’s own fault, we can further even call it a *radical* innate *evil* in human nature”<sup>219</sup>. Arendt’s way of understanding radical evil as has been seen and as shall continuously be shown, stems from the fact that she refers to evil as being radical because it seeks to destroy the core or root of that which, properly speaking, makes one human. In that sense, one could say that for Arendt, radical evil is a moral category. Arendt also humbly admits that very little is known about the nature of

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<sup>216</sup> When Kant defines radical evil, he represents the Christian term *radix malorum*. This is what he writes in , *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, III Man is by nature bad pg. 6:20: “The depravity of human nature, then, is not so much to be called badness, if this word is taken in its strict sense, namely, as a disposition (subjective principle of maxims) to adopt the bad, as bad, into one’s maxims as a spring (for that is devilish); but rather perversity of heart, which, on account of the result, is also called a bad heart. This may co-exist with a Will [“*Wille*”] good in general, and arises from the frailty of human nature, which is not strong enough to follow its adopted principles, combined with its impurity in not distinguishing the springs (even of well-intentioned actions) from one another by moral rule. So that ultimately it looks at best only to the conformity of its actions with the law, not to their derivation from it, that is, to the law itself as the only spring. Now although this does not always give rise to wrong actions and a propensity thereto, that is, to vice, yet the habit of regarding the absence of vice as a conformity of the mind to the law of duty (as virtue) must itself be designated a radical perversity of the human heart (since in this case the spring in the maxims is not regarded at all, but only the obedience to the letter of the law).”

<sup>217</sup> Kant, E., (2001) *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (6:93-94).

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 6:32.

such evil acts, ‘even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene’ (HC 241).

“All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which radically destroy wherever they make their appearance.” (HC 241)

Karl Jaspers in a letter to Arendt dated October 22, 1963 referring to the same term said,

“Now you have delivered the crucial word against ‘radical evil,’ against gnosis! You are with Kant, who said: Man cannot be a devil, and I am with you. But it's a pity that the term ‘radical evil,’ in a very different sense that was not understood even by Goethe and Schiller, comes from Kant.” (AJC 525)

Here one sees that Arendt’s mentor agrees with her that ‘man cannot be a devil’. However, he laments the fact that it is Kant who first used the term probably because Kant’s use of it was very different to Arendt’s use. In a way, this helps to affirm that when Arendt used this term, it was not in the sense that Kant employed it.<sup>220</sup>

The point is that man is capable of radical evil as was evidenced in WWII<sup>221</sup>. Arendt says that the decisive moment for her was the day that she learnt about Auschwitz (EU 14). It was the day she ‘discovered’

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<sup>220</sup> Cf. According to Formosa, Arendt uses the term ‘radical’ in the sense of ‘extreme’, whereas Kant uses the term in the sense of ‘rooted-in’. For Kant radical evil refers to the innate but freely chosen propensity to evil that is part of human nature. (Formosa, P., (2007). “Is Radical Evil Banal? Is Banal Evil Radical?”).

<sup>221</sup> Abbreviation for second World War.

radical evil as she explains in an interview held with Gaus.<sup>222</sup> For Arendt, it is important to first of all accept the fact that all men have a genuine capacity for evil. Only when this has been done, may one analyse the nature of man (EU 134). Evil in and of itself, is not the same as capacity for evil and a deep analysis of the former would be out of the scope of this work. What is of interest is radical evil described by Arendt and as witnessed under the totalitarian regime of WWII. It is this radical evil that is the main object of this chapter, and in general of this work, unless stated otherwise.

To begin with, all men are capable of committing radical evil regardless of who they are or in what times they live. According to Arendt, this was proven by the Nazis who were ordinary ‘men like ourselves’ (EU 134) as she makes very clear in her review of *The Devil’s Share* (Denis de Rougemont)<sup>223</sup>. It was done through a process designed to condition men. It was a conditioning process which Arendt studied at length and in depth and then wrote about extensively in ensuing years even before her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. A description of the implementation of the “Final Solution” for example, can be found in her 1946 review of *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime Against the Jewish People*, compiled and edited by the World Jewish Congress, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the Vaad Leumi, and the American Committee of Jewish Writers, Artists and Scientists, New York, 1946, and *Hitler’s Professors*, by Max Weinreich, New York, 1946, *Commentary*, II/3.

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<sup>222</sup> Venmans gives a detailed explanation of how significant this day was for Arendt in relation to ‘the revelation’ of radical evil. (Venmans, P., (2005). *El mundo según Hannah Arendt*. Alonso, P. L., (Trans), Madrid: Punto de Vista, D.L. 2017)

<sup>223</sup> Apart from other things, she accuses him of immaturity, metaphysical opportunism, and writing about the nature of the Devil instead of the nature of man as was pointed out previously, thereby evading the responsibility of man for his deeds. Nevertheless, she concludes that his document is a true document human. (EU pg. 133-135)

Briefly summarised, the perpetration process of radical evil consisted in first of all killing the juridical person by removing any rights the individual might have such that they had no rights to have rights and were “rightless” before the law (TOT 267, 291, 296, 451). The calamity of this, Arendt explains, is the fact that “they no longer belong to any community whatsoever” (TOT 295) meaning that “no law exists for them” (TOT 296). Basically, the Nazis created a condition of complete rightlessness before the right to live was challenged (*ibid.*).

Next, they killed the moral person by removing the very possibility of making moral choices. The very possibility of choosing good was removed by leaving choices that forced one to choose between murdering a friend or murdering your very wife and children. This was taken to such a level that martyrdom was made impossible since people had been removed into concentration camps where their actions would have no social meaning (TOT 451) and without witnesses there is no testimony (*ibid.*). Basically, death was made anonymous as it was impossible to know whether a prisoner who was dead or alive, thereby robbing death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life (TOT 452).

The final stage consisted of removing any remaining trace of uniqueness or individuality and differentiation (TOT 453). This occurred when men had been reduced to a bundle of reactions exchangeable at random for any other (TOT 438). For Arendt, “this part of the human person, precisely because it depends so essentially on nature and on forces that cannot be controlled by the will, is the hardest to destroy (and when destroyed is most easily repaired) (TOT 453). The means used to achieve this final stage are numerous and consist in a great part of

torture<sup>224</sup>. The aim of these methods, Arendt explains, “is to manipulate the human body—with its infinite possibilities of suffering—in such a way as to make it destroy the human person as inexorably as do certain mental diseases of organic origin” (TOT 453).

The outcome of her study was that; the whole process adopted in the totalitarian regime in Germany, was used to condition men and whole societies in order to get them to the point where “innocence and guilt were no longer products of human behaviour” (EU 198, TOT 438). Under the totalitarian system, to attain this goal, what the Nazis did was reduce man to a functionary to the point that his individual reactions were reduced to a kind of mass response, common or identical to all who were under the same system. In other words, men were conditioned such that there was no human element of spontaneity nor any individual reaction once he had been successfully conditioned as desired. It resulted in men who were ‘a completely undistinguishable and undefinable specimen of the species homo sapiens.’ (EU 304) There was nothing unique about any of the individuals nor anything outstanding that is typical of the plurality of men. The unique individual person was gone. This was true of everyone including the manipulators (TOT 459). Each

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<sup>224</sup> In Arendt’s words: “First came calculated neglect, deprivation, and shame, when the weak in body died together with those strong and defiant enough to take their own lives. Second came outright starvation, combined with forced labour, when people died by the thousands but at different intervals of time, according to their stamina. Last came the death factories – and they all died together, the young and the old, the weak and the strong, the sick and the healthy; not as people, not as men and women, children and adults, boys and girls, not as good and bad, beautiful and ugly – but brought down to the lowest common denominator of organic life itself, plunged into the darkest and deepest abyss of primal equality, like cattle, like matter, like things that had neither body nor soul, nor even a physiognomy upon which death could stamp its seal.” (EU pg. 198)

and every member of the system had become *superfluous*. Nobody had any personal care, not for themselves nor for others. In Arendt's words,

“Once inside the death factories, everything became an accident completely beyond control of those who did the suffering and those who inflicted it. And in more than one case, those who inflicted the suffering one day became the sufferers the next.” (EU 198-199)

Meaning that it applied to all men within the camps. That is why Arendt says; “There is only one thing that seems to be discernible: we may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous.” (TOT 459). Basically, the motive was to end up with men who could no longer be men nor individuals since they believed in their own superfluosity (TOT 459).

To better understand the meaning of the word superfluous, it will be well to see what synonyms it has and these include words such as; unnecessary, needless, unneeded, inessential, pointless, redundant, surplus, redundant, useless, unproductive, expendable, disposable, dispensable, unwanted, waste, excess, extra, spare, not required. The list actually goes on but these terms serve to show what Arendt meant when she said that men became superfluous. Men got the point where they were convinced that they served for nothing and that therefore their existence was absolutely pointless and had no purpose. No man can live like that, neither has man been made to exist under suchlike assumptions. In other words, making men superfluous implies that they then cease to be men *qua* men since each individual is necessary, needed, essential, has a purpose, is irreplaceable, wanted, special, useful, productive, as well as all the other words that serve as opposites of the adjectives that are synonymous to the word superfluous mentioned previously. Meaning, everything that Arendt considered to be specific to the human being, would be and was annulled when men were made to

be superfluous. She says, “The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive) *robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life.*” (TOT 452 emphasis added) <sup>225</sup>. This is what the Nazis succeeded in doing by making men superfluous. With these arguments and explanations, Hannah Arendt denounces the attack on life itself, the importance of the meaning of life and death, as well as that of a fulfilled life. These reasons are not merely political, much as she has been hailed for her political theories but are undoubtedly anthropological and consequently of metaphysical origin.

When the totalitarian terror attacked the moral person by “making decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal” (TOT 452), they left no clear criteria to define or describe moral action. With this, she affirms the importance of the correct formation of a moral conscience in order to do good. Killing the moral person was the most terrible triumph because it (totalitarian terror) succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape thus making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal” (TOT 452). It is ‘most terrible’ because men ceased to be men having no right criteria to live a ‘fulfilled’ life nor a moral one at that. It explains Arendt’s indignation at making men superfluous. This arguments that she provides and uses is again undoubtedly of anthropological nature and cannot be said to be purely political.

The argument is that doing away with superfluousness goes against Arendt’s political idea of plurality which the totalitarian system aimed to destroy. What she describes here is the radical evilness of the deed

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<sup>225</sup> This, in part, was done by forbidding grief and remembrance of anyone that entered a concentration camp (TOT 452). They were wiped out from ones’ memories, from history and from the face of the earth, so to speak leaving no trace behind.

because it affects the very nature of man (TOT 458). This is a crime that affects men as human beings and is thus a crime against human beings<sup>226</sup> and humanity.

A description of what she thinks of this evil and how she classifies it comes out clearly in her *Denktagebuch*<sup>227</sup> which constitutes annotations of Arendt's personal thoughts which she had between 1950 and 1973. The recording of interest is dated 30 January 1951. This same idea is prevalent in her letter to Jasper dated two months later on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1951 (AJC 166). There she explains that,

“Evil has proved to be more radical than expected. In objective terms, modern crimes are not provided for in the Ten Commandments. Or: the Western tradition is suffering from the preconception that the most evil things human beings can do arise from the vice of selfishness. Yet we know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do anymore with such humanly understandable motives. What radical evil really is I don't know, but it seems to me it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: *making human beings as human*

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<sup>226</sup> More will be said about this being a 'crime' shortly.

<sup>227</sup> See for example the following text, “In den totalitären Regimen erscheint deutlich, dass die Allmacht des Menschen der Überflüssigkeit der Menschen entspricht. Darum entspringt aus dem Glauben, dass alles möglich sei, unmittelbar bei Praxis, die Menschen überflüssig zu machen, teils durch Dezimierung und generell durch die Liquidierung der Menschen qua Menschen. Wenn der Mensch allmächtig ist, dann ist in der Tat nicht einzusehen, warum er so viele Exemplare gibt, es sei denn, um diese Allmacht ins Werk zu setzen, also als reine objekthafte Helfer. Jeder zweite Mensch ist bereits ein Gegenbeweis gegen die Allmacht des Menschen, eine lebendige Demonstration, dass nicht alles möglich ist. Es ist primär die Pluralität, welche die Macht der Menschen und des Menschen eingrenzt. Die Vorstellung der Allmacht und des Alles-ist-möglich führt notwendigerweise zu der Einzigkeit.“ (*Denktagebuch*, Heft II, Januar 1951, [30] pgs. 53–54).

*beings superfluous* (...) This happens as soon as unpredictability – which, in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity – is eliminated.” (AJC 166 emphasis added)

Later in the same private letter to Karl Jaspers, she admits that ‘None of it is thought through at all.’ (ibid.) and yet it is interesting to note that there is no contradiction<sup>228</sup> between these concepts and ideas, and any of her earlier or later explanations of the same concepts such as spontaneity and ideas such as the results of the elimination thereof. An analysis of these thoughts here reveal that they are very much in line with her published thoughts and ideas and are definitely characteristically Arendtian. For example; she will continue to relate radical evil to have emerged from a totalitarian system in which the intention was to make man superfluous (TOT 459); that radical evil has nothing to do with humanly understandable sinful motives (TOT 443); but that it goes beyond human comprehension (ibid.); and that it can no longer be understood as it was traditionally, before WWII when evil sprang from sinful motives (TOT 443) which corresponded to the evil.

Traditionally, she explains (ibid.), evil deeds presupposed evil intentions and evil motives. In the same way, the degree of evil committed,

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<sup>228</sup> Bernstein seems to be of the same mind and he goes on to give a more detailed discussion to show where and how there is no discrepancy between the statement made by Arendt in relation to her later ideas despite the fact that the prior ideas had not been thought through (Bernstein, R.J., (2002). *Radical Evil*, pgs. 201-210). He makes an interesting observation when he compares the use of the term spontaneity in Arendt as compared to Kant. He claims, “Kant explicitly stated that self-love (selfishness) is the source of all evil. This is just what Arendt denies in regard to what *she* calls radical evil. Making human beings as human beings superfluous is more radical than disobeying the Kantian categorical imperative.” (ibid. 208)

I must admit that I agree with Arendt and consequently with Bernstein. Treating individuals as means only is not as radical as attempting to eliminate human spontaneity.

corresponded to the degree of wickedness of the motives. However, when man was made superfluous under totalitarian rule, this was no longer possible and the same criteria was no longer applicable. They had come up with crimes that were evil beyond the wildest imagination. This is how she phrases it in her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*;

“in their effort to prove that everything is possible, totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive. When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive. Just as the victims in the death factories or the holes of oblivion are no longer ‘human’ in the eyes of the executioners, so this newest species of criminals is beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness.” (TOT 459)

When this occurred, and evil could no longer be explained or understood because ‘the impossible was made possible’ referring to the crimes that the Nazi’s committed, which in themselves were ‘unpunishable’ and ‘unforgivable’ (ibid.), then it became *absolute evil* (TOT 459). What can be understood from this is that once one gets to the point of committing absolute evil – evil that ‘friendship cannot forgive’ or ‘anger cannot revenge’, then one commits radical evil. In the following quote written to her first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she writes,

“And if it is true that in the initial stages of totalitarianism absolute evil appears (absolute because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensible motives), it is also true that without it we might never have known the truly radical

nature of Evil.” (TOT viii–ix)

In other words, where there is absolute evil there is radical evil. Thereby implying that absolute evil is not understandable logically or comprehensively and is thus irrational. Radical evil, on the other hand, is thus used to describe the nature of absolute evil, meaning that it is perverse in nature. In *The Human Condition* she maintains the same ideas. She talks about ‘radical evil’ as defined by Kant in relation to unpunishable and thus unforgivable elements (HC 241).

What we do know is that it is destructive and beyond anything that had happened until then. It being way beyond the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, therefore justifies its incomprehensibility. Levinas will simply claim that evil is an excess that resists total comprehension.<sup>229</sup>

With radical evil understood as a moral category, Arendt holds that the destruction of man was such that, “innocence and guilt were no longer products of human behaviour” and that “saint and sinner were equally degraded to the status of possible corpses” (EU 198), men were depersonalised in “unanimity in opinion” and their “inner spontaneity” was killed<sup>230</sup> (EU 198). What is left when all this is gone is indescribable and the closest description would be humans who are not human, or who are depersonalised men if they ever existed.

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<sup>229</sup> Levinas E. (1983) “Transcendence and Evil”. In Tymieniecka A.T., (Ed.) *The Phenomenology of Man and of the Human Condition. Analecta Husserliana* (The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research), vol 14. Dordrecht:Springer, pg. 158.

<sup>230</sup> According to Formoso, P. (2007), “Spontaneity is for Arendt the mere possibility of doing something that cannot be simply and completely explained on the basis of reactions to the environment and preceding events.” (Formoso, P. (2007) in *Philosophy & Social Criticism*)

By September of the same year 1951, Arendt will have given these considerations more thought as is evidenced in the *Denktagebuch* in her annotation dated on the 5<sup>th</sup>. There she outlines some characteristics of radical evil much as they are only psychological ones as she herself admits at the end of the following quote.

“The characteristics of radical evil are:

1. Lack of motive and selflessness
2. Complete lack of imagination that ensues from a complete failure of compassion/pity, even self-pity!
3. As a consequence of everything purely logical, final conclusions are drawn from once accepted premises and others with the argument: “He who has said A, must say B”, must hold his ground.

These are only the psychological symptoms, not the real reasons and not the nature of radical evil.”<sup>231</sup>

It is noteworthy that Arendt already highlights these characteristics years before the Eichmann trial took place much as she attributed several of them to him, in whom she saw them personified. They are characteristics she had pondered way before she came to apply them to him and they

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<sup>231</sup> My translation from Arendt’s *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, Heft VI, Sept 1951, [5] pg. 128). The original text in German: “Die Merkmale des radikal Bösen sind:

1. Motiv-losigkeit und Selbstlosigkeit.
2. Völliger Mangel an Einbildungskraft, aus dem völliges Versagen des Mitleids, auch des Mitleids mit sich selbst!, entspringt.
3. Konsequenz alles rein Logischen, die letzten Folgerungen aus den einmal angenommenen Prämissen ziehen und die Anderen mit dem Argument: Wer A gesagt hat, muss B sagen, bei der Stange halten.

Dies sind nur die psychologischen Symptome, nicht die eigentlichen Zwecke und nicht das Wesen der radikal Bösen.” (*Denktagebuch*, Heft VI, Sept 1951, [5] pg. 128).

are not as a result of having seen Eichmann. These characteristics are well described in *Chapter 2: The Accused* of her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as well as elsewhere (EU 21-35) and as mentioned previously in this work. You have a man without motive, lacking in imagination and self-pity, as well as one who followed a given line of reasoning regardless of all else. Regarding Arendt's first characteristic mentioned above in the citation, it was seen that with radical evil, one does not necessarily need a motive. When it comes to her second characteristic of complete lack of imagination, it is well to note that this connection between imagination and radical evil is not new. It goes back to the times of Aristotle who claims that with the help of the imagination, a rational being projects into the future, a pursued good<sup>232</sup>. Carbonell is of the same mind and did an extensive study of this in an article entitled, "*Phantasia logistikē* in the Configuration of Desire in Aristotle." In this article she confirms that desire (to do good) at an intellectual level, is a principle of action and that "the end that man pursues, is precisely his own image, ... as configured by his desire."<sup>233</sup> In order to pursue the good, the intellect has to be able to imagine and desire the imagined good first. This quality of imagination was lacking in Eichmann, who seemingly never came with his own ideas, nor does there seem to have been any future desire initiated by him to do good.

This completely contrasts with Arendt's way of being and character as a person. From the descriptions and from her writings, one can tell that she was a passionate woman even from her school days. For example, Young-Bruehl speaks of ceaseless "displays of independence and

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<sup>232</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2016, 433b 7-10.

<sup>233</sup> My translation from Spanish as published by Carbonell, C. (2012) "Phantasia logistikē in the Configuration of Desire in Aristotle." In *Ideas y Valores*, vol. LXII, No. 152, pgs. 133 – 158.

wilfulness”<sup>234</sup>, how her mother had to play the mediator “patching up damaged relationships, counselling patience, smoothing over quarrels”<sup>235</sup>, “how she led her classmates in a boycott of the teacher’s classes and was, as a consequence, expelled from school”<sup>236</sup>, to mention but a few incidences from her childhood.

Arendt had the stamina and determination to prepare privately for her *Abitur*<sup>237</sup> – Eichmann on the other hand, is known to have done poorly in school and for a long time after principally worked as a traveling salesman<sup>238</sup> (EJ 29-30). Arendt had enough imagination to fake a headache in order to leave school early to be able to be with her boyfriend – a man who was five years her senior (ibid. 35) while Eichmann principally followed orders<sup>239</sup> even meticulously but with hardly any if any initiative (EJ 31). The fact that she is described as uncertain, shy and distrustful at this stage, does not contradict the fact that she was still perceived to be “difficult and mysterious” or the fact that she wrote poetry (ibid. 36), which in turn imply strength of character as well as creativity and an avid imagination as opposed to Eichmann whom she held to be “to all appearances, not interested in questions of conscience” (EJ 26) nor in “metaphysics” (EJ 27). Where

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<sup>234</sup> Young-Bruehl, E. (1982) *Hannah Arendt For Love of the World*, pg. 33.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>238</sup> A life Arendt claimed he hated so much so that he would have preferred his current life as *Oberstbannführer a.D* which including the hanging and all, as opposed to quiet life as traveling salesman for the Vacuum Oil Company. (EJ 34)

<sup>239</sup> When Germany lost the war, Arendt quotes him to have said, “I sensed I would have to live a leaderless and difficult individual life, I would receive no directives from anybody, no orders and commands would any longer be issued to me, no pertinent ordinances would be there to consult—in brief, a life never known before lay before me.” (EJ 32). This shows just how dependent Eichmann was on taking orders from others and in not taking initiative.

Arendt was passionate in her love and desire to understand the world, as can be seen from her writings and publications, Eichmann lacked motivation and incentive.

Going back a month earlier to August of 1951, before her aforementioned annotation in her *Denktagebuch* cited above, Arendt had written down some of her thoughts and understanding of good and evil. The principal and most important idea that stands out, is her affirmation that good and evil is a phenomenon that can occur between men and between men only. She also implies that if it is between men then it cannot be ontological. What is seen in this interpretation is a proposition of the separation of anthropology from ontology, for if it is between men or anthropological for that matter, then it cannot be ontological.

My translation of her text explaining this thought is given below:

“Speaking against an ontological view of good and evil, is the fact that good and evil can actually only appear between people, thus essentially it is always right and wrong.

As opposed to this and in favour of an ontological interpretation of good and evil, is the fact that radical evil no longer has anything to do with right and wrong, that it no longer appears between people nor does it need to, and further, it cannot be understood through anthropological categories – and all ‘moral’ categories are anthropological categories.”<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> My translation. This is how the original text appears in German: “Gegen eine ontologische Betrachtung von Gut und Böse spricht, dass Gut und Böse eigentlich immer nur zwischen Menschen auftauchen kann, also wesentlich immer Recht und Unrecht ist.

Above, Arendt claims that ‘radical evil no longer has anything to do with right and wrong’, and that neither does it come up between men, nor does it have a need to. This is interesting and of importance because she makes clear that her understanding of radical evil is neither its moral content nor its ontological quality. Rather, she is referring to the phenomenon of making men superfluous, which for her, is an evil that is beyond all known or categorised evil. Unless understood like this, the claim that ‘radical evil no longer has anything to do with right and wrong’ would be absurd. But if taken to be understood as radical evil according to Arendt and as seen before, then this claim is understandable because by it she would be understood to mean that radical is beyond this. The same argument applies to her accusation that it cannot be understood through anthropological categories. This places it in the moral category. In the same way, one would also understand why she means that it ‘need not’ come up between men. Rather, as explained in her 1951 letter to Karl Jaspers, it is “the omnipotence of an individual man (that) would make men superfluous” (AJC 166). This is incompatible with the human condition of plurality because of the existence of “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (HC 7).

It may now be useful to revise the explanation that Arendt gives about the Nazis who aimed to kill both the juridical and moral person. In her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she explains how this was done when they (the Nazis) diverted hate from those who were actually

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Gegen dies und für ein ontologisches Deuten von Gut und Böse spricht, dass das radikal Böse mit Recht und Unrecht nichts mehr zu tun hat, nicht mehr zwischen Menschen auftaucht oder aufzutauchen braucht, überhaupt mit anthropologischen Kategorien – und alle „moralischen“ Kategorien sind anthropologische Kategorien – nicht mehr zu fassen ist.” (*Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973* Heft V [20], pg. 116).

guilty<sup>241</sup>. What they did, she says, was to blur ‘the distinguishing line between persecutor and persecuted’. The result was that there was no clear definition between those who were “good” or “evil” or guilty and not guilty or responsible or not responsible. Meaning that everyone was made a war criminal as well as a potential war victim without knowing why or for what reasons one was classified as such simply because the concepts of good and evil had been made completely incoherent.

They had succeeded in forming people – both persecutor and persecuted – who ‘did *not* have a conscience’ so to speak. They were no longer sensitive to that which is good and that which is evil nor who was guilty or innocent. Without a conscience or more precisely, with a ‘deformed’ or ‘insensitive’ conscience, as well as one lacking in imagination as pointed out earlier, one is no longer able to identify the good or to identify evil. Without a conscience, when an order was issued, it was followed through because that was the course of action to be taken regardless of the moral value of it. Orders were followed through for want of a conscience and so were unable to stop to think or reflect on *what* they were doing. This is in line with the third characteristic that Arendt points out as typical for radical evil.

Eichmann, the man, was “normal” and “no exception within the Nazi regime” (EJ 26). They had all been conditioned to be and think like that. It is what the totalitarian system did to men. These were the kind of people who possessed the necessary qualities such that radical evil could easily be personified in them.

The result was moral chaos in thoughts and actions that ought to be natural or intuitive. It also meant that nothing really matters and that there is no reason as to why one is a persecutor or the persecuted. This

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<sup>241</sup> Some of this she explains in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (TOT 447–448).

incoherence in turn makes life and war itself pointless and meaningless since all were equally superfluous.

### 3.2.1 The supposedly social function of radical evil

Much as radical evil was ‘incoherent’, totalitarianism was neither meaningless nor pointless. There were reasons for establishing this system that Arendt points out. She highlights the fact that by maintaining absolute, divine power, which is omnipotence, the rest of humanity ends up to be simply superfluous. Men in the highest rank of the totalitarian hierarchy had a suicidal loyalty to their leader who, if the ideology were to work, had to be an omnipotent being as well as infallible in all his actions (TOT 387) meaning that everything he did was unquestioned regardless of what it was nor of its moral implications. This, Arendt claims, was “the basis of the structure” (ibid.). She writes,

“What binds these men together is a firm and sincere belief in human omnipotence. Their moral cynicism, their belief that everything is permitted, rests on the solid conviction that everything is possible.” (TOT 387)

She further comments on this ‘delusion of omnipotence’ in a letter that she writes to Jaspers on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1951 (AJC 166). This is where she says that if an individual man qua man were indeed omnipotent then “there is no reason why men should exist in the plural” (ibid.). Superfluous men, if existent, imply a lack of plurality, which for Arendt is a necessary human condition. Yet man is not an omnipotent being and those who think so are deceived. As she says,

“Yet they too are deceived, deceived by their impudent conceited idea that everything can be done and their contemptuous conviction that everything that exists is merely a

temporary obstacle that superior organisation will certainly destroy.” (TOT 387)

Sooner or later, they realise that they are not omnipotent but what is of interest is Arendt’s explanation of why this system eventually collapses. She attributes it to “substantial power of stable communities” (TOT 387). Even though Arendt does not comment much more on ‘stable communities’, in her later book, *The Human Condition*, she dedicates a great section of it to the *polis* as was seen in the first chapter of this work. There she acknowledges that power which lies in numbers in a stable community, is able to eventually, if used appropriately, to overcome a possible world conspiracy (ibid).

However, in the absence of ‘stable communities’, the fantasy of omnipotence and the belief that absolutely everything is possible, are essential for the preservation of a totalitarian regime’s power. This fantasy is kept alive by the existence of the concentration camps. Only there could the necessary conditions be achieved. Arendt points out that the seeming uselessness of the camps is only apparent because “in reality they are most essential to the preservation of the regime’s power” (TOT 456).

“Without concentration camps, without the undefined fear they inspire and the very well-defined training they offer in totalitarian domination, which can nowhere else be fully tested with all of its most radical possibilities, a totalitarian state can neither inspire its nuclear troops with fanaticism nor maintain a whole people in complete apathy.” (TOT 456)

They were necessary for maintaining power over both the dominated and the dominating and ‘a whole people’ as mentioned above. For as long as the concentration camps existed, this was a sure possibility.

There, they were able to create the adequate conditions to deform men's consciences.

“Through the creation of conditions under which conscience ceases to be adequate and to do good becomes utterly impossible, the consciously organised complicity of all men in the crimes of totalitarian regimes is extended to the victims and thus made really total.” (TOT 452)

If one's conscience is not 'adequate' one is left with nowhere else to intuitively turn to as a reference or guide as to what one ought to do. To Arendt, an adequate conscience “tells him that it is better to die a victim than to live as a bureaucrat of murder” (TOT 452) but without a conscience, such conclusions could not be made. Further, “totalitarian terror ... succeeded in cutting the moral person off from the individualist escape and in making the decisions of conscience absolutely questionable and equivocal.” (TOT 452) The result is that one was left in a rather hopeless state, similar to what she termed 'living corpses' (TOT 453). If one does not act consciously, then one acts unconsciously, unsurely and in a general state of confusion. This is highly disconcerting. If one acts unconsciously then they cannot take responsibility for their actions and therefore strictly speaking, these are not human acts. “What totalitarian ideologies therefore aim at is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionising transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself.” (TOT 458)

Strictly speaking, human nature cannot be changed or transformed much as they tried to do so in the concentration camps. It is what it is and it is appropriate to man, inherent in man and inseparable from his being. However, it may be suppressed as was the case in the concentration camps to the extent that men began to exist as if they were not human and as if they were beings without the superior faculties of the intellect

and the will – without reason. They continued to have these faculties but they had been suppressed. Hence, in the effort of trying to destroy it, the totalitarian system merely succeeded in destroying man himself since the two are interdependent. To destroy human nature is to destroy man and the effort to try to do so is the unforgivable crime and the unjustifiable act which were termed ‘radical evil’ and which could not be explained.<sup>242</sup>

The absurdness of the idea to try to transform man did not hinder the idea from actually being accepted by society. Given the evilness of the deed, how is it that society accepted such an absolute evil? Arendt explains that society accepted radical evil because at that time, “society had emancipated itself completely from public concerns” (TOT 80) and, politics itself “was becoming a part of social life” (ibid.). This in turn resulted in a “victory of bourgeois values over the citizen’s sense of responsibility” (ibid.) and consequently in the acceptance of radical evil. Emancipation from public concerns meant a lack of sense of responsibility of the citizens which in turn resulted in the “decomposition of political issues” (ibid.). If the citizens are not concerned about what is going on in society and if they do not take responsibility, then it is possible and much easier to assimilate crime, make it more acceptable and transform it into vice for which they will not take responsibility (TOT 80-81).

“Human wickedness, if accepted by society, is changed from an act of will into an inherent, psychological quality which men cannot choose or reject but which is imposed upon him from without, and which rules him as compulsively as the drug rules the addict.’ (TOT 80)

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<sup>242</sup> Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, Heft V, August 1951 [20], pg. 116.

Human wickedness, as was seen previously is not the same as radical evil. Nevertheless, the consequence of acceptance of human wickedness is applicable to the acceptance of radical evil. Therefore, similarly and as described in her quote cited above, if accepted, it has a higher probability of forming part of social standards which are imposed upon man from without. That is why she is of the view that vice is a reflection of crime in society (TOT 80) though she attributes this discovery to Disraeli<sup>243</sup> (ibid.). She goes on to say that “In assimilating crime and transforming it into vice, society denies all responsibility and establishes a world of fatalities in which men find themselves entangled.” (ibid.) Arendt’s point is that crime is not vice but ends up being seen as such “whenever the legal and political machine is not separated from society so that social standards can penetrate into it and become political and legal rules.” (ibid.). This is what must be avoided so that there is no confusion. Otherwise, social standards become political and legal rules, and if that happens, they “will invariably prove more cruel and inhuman than laws...which respect and recognise man’s independent responsibility for his behaviour.” (TOT 81). This is precisely what happened during the times of WWII when society ended up accepting unfathomable radical evil.<sup>244</sup>

Further, moral qualities ought not to be imposed from without but from within. Meaning that it should not be society that imposes moral qualities. What ought to be imposed from without are political and legal rules. It is well to note that social standards are not political rules and as

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<sup>243</sup> Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) was a conservative who twice served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. He was of Jewish birth.

<sup>244</sup> Arendt further explains how, “Jewish origin, without religious and political connotation, became everywhere a psychological quality, was changed into ‘Jewishness,’ and from then on could be considered only in the categories of virtue or vice.” (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pg. 83)

mentioned in the quote, the two need to be separated. It is also noteworthy that one does not necessarily lead to the other.

Unfortunately, Germany got itself into a state in which national interests took priority over law. Arendt herself confirms that,

“the transformation of the state from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation had been completed; the nation had conquered the state, national interest had priority over law ...” (TOT 275).

It is typical of totalitarian regimes for national interest to take priority over law. In the case of Germany, Hitler went so far as to proclaim: “right is what is good for the German people” (ibid.). This implied that what was good for the German people (national interest) is what was good in itself. This completely altered the meaning of the concept of good since good was now made relative to change. What is good for the German people could change at any time and that would mean that good is relative. What the statement implies is that good is relative to national interest. As Arendt explained, this is what happened in Germany.

Elsewhere, she says, ‘Nazis were told that “Right is what is good for the movement,”<sup>245</sup> and yet these two interests did by no means always

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<sup>245</sup> This change of the official motto can be found in the *Organisationsbuch der NSDAP* pg. 7.

coincide<sup>246</sup> (TOT 412) meaning that what was good for the movement was not always right ontologically. One can only guess why the Germans copied and adopted this phrase. She also says,

“A conception of law which identifies what is right with the notion of what is good for ... becomes inevitable once the absolute and transcendent measurements of religion or the law of nature have lost their authority. And this predicament is by no means solved if the unit to which the ‘good for’ applies is as large as mankind itself.” (TOT 299)

This is in line with what she had mentioned earlier—the law of nature had lost its authority and was subject to national interest. When this is so, abuse is easy against minorities through majority (national) decision. She explains how this can be,

“For it is quite conceivable, and even within the realm of practical political possibilities, that one fine day a highly organised and mechanised humanity will conclude quite democratically —namely by majority decision—that for humanity as a whole it would be better to liquidate certain parts thereof.” (TOT 299)

Thereby, she implies that the majority vote becomes the source of the law and is therefore the measure of that which is good. This is

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<sup>246</sup> With reference to this she quotes Fritsch as footnote no. 43. op.cit., “[Der Juden] oberster Grundsatz lautet: ‘Alles, was dem Volke nützt, ist moralisch und ist heilig.’” (TOT 358) She says, “The Protocols are a very curious and noteworthy document in many aspects” (ibid.), that, “their essential political characteristic is that in their crackpot manner they touch on every important issue of the time. They are antinational in principle and picture the nation-state as a colossus with feet of clay. They discard national sovereignty and believe in a world empire on a national basis” (TOT 358-359) among other things.

something she claims is ‘one of the oldest perplexities of political philosophy..., but which long ago caused Plato to say: “Not man, but a god, must be the measure of all things.”’ (ibid.) From the above it can be seen that she is not in agreement with good being relative to the majority vote and therefore that it is not man who is the measure of what is good. But more than that, the effects of lack of freedom on society are vast and disastrous as they result in a complete breakdown of the *polis* as well as a dysfunctional political ethical framework.

For society to end up like that, is due to an emancipation from public concerns as well as a decomposition of political issues and lack of responsibility of citizens. Basically, what is seen is a faulty political system. Its corruption is what led to such atrocious acts as well as the belief that politics is beyond moral good and evil. When men have been transformed and find themselves without a conscience to live in this world, with a lack of criteria between what is good or evil, they become men with an altered human condition. What this implies, following the Arendtian way of thinking, is what constitutes our next task.

### 3.2.2 Superfluosness unveiled

A good way to start would be with an analysis that the effect of radical evil has had on the human condition of plurality. To do this, a step back needs to be taken so as to review the Arendtian concept of plurality and how this goes against superfluosness.

As earlier defined, the public sphere was “the space of men’s free deeds and living words” (OR 285). What we have in the authentic *polis* is a plurality of men, all of who are equal and who, if and when they act, distinguish themselves. Arendt claims that both Aristotle and Seneca agree that there is a special kind of relationship between ‘action and being together’ (HC 23) thereby emphasising that the two relate in some

sense. As quoted earlier, “plurality is specifically the condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life.” (HC 7) From this, the first aspect of the human condition that results from authentic political action is that it makes plurality possible. If there is plurality then consequently and simultaneously, there is uniqueness – there is plurality because of several individuals.

Plurality is not actively sought but will come about if the people are with others and are neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness (HC 180). It is only when their action and speech become ‘mere talk’, meaning that anyone can be made to reproduce it thus implying that it is not an action of the individual, or when action ‘loses its specific character’, meaning that the very actions can be carried out mechanically regardless of the actor, that human togetherness is lost and the agent is no longer able to disclose himself nor to distinguish himself from amongst the others (HC 180). If togetherness<sup>247</sup> is lost, then so is the individual because one may now refer to a mass of people (HC 52-

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<sup>247</sup> Human togetherness is not the same as otherness. ‘Otherness’, she says, ‘in its most abstract form is found only in the sheer multiplication of inorganic objects, whereas all organic life already shows variations and distinctions, even between specimens of the same species.’ (HC 176) Further, being one among others is different from sharing being. Rather, it is the coming together of unique beings for a purpose that results in the *polis*. Not their mere being together nor the fact that they share being with one other.

53). Arendt explains that “completely un-principled power<sup>248</sup> politics could not be played until a mass of people was available who were free of all principles and so large numerically that they surpassed the ability of state and society to take care of them” (TOT 156-157). This is what was done to the Jews who had lost all principles beginning with their statelessness as citizens and consequently their state as pariah with nowhere to go and with no one to turn to.

It was necessary that men become one more in the masses in the totalitarian regimes because only then does it become possible to render men to be superfluous. But people are not ‘inorganic objects’ much as the Nazis tried to make them out to be. What they succeeded in doing was to suppress men from manifesting the variations and uniqueness proper to man as an individual being. This is why Arendt says, “In man..., distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.” (HC 176) This is precisely what is killed when men are made to ‘become’ superfluous.

It is on this note that it becomes important to point out that strictly speaking, it was only their fate that was made uniform because men continued to be unique in as far as their person, history and thoughts are

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<sup>248</sup> For Arendt, the presence of men and them living together is ‘the only indispensable material factor in the generation of power’ (HC 201) meaning, only for as long as men remain active and live together so that ‘the potentialities of action are always present’ (ibid.)<sup>248</sup>. To Arendt, when men act together in the *polis*, and therefore politically, their action results in ‘common deliberation’ ‘on the strength of mutual pledges’ (OR 215) provided that action is together or common and that the undertaking is mutual (ibid.). Also, power as an entity of a potential nature ‘can never be fully materialised’ to such an extent that it is almost ‘independent of material factors’ since it does not depend on the actual number of men (HC 200) nor on the type of men but only on their presence. In other words, ‘human power corresponds to the condition of plurality’ (ibid. 201).

concerned. But as has been mentioned, the Nazis succeeded in suppressing men from manifesting their uniqueness *qua* men (HC 176) – they simply became one more of a multiplicity of many because, “In a perfect totalitarian government, ...all men have become One Man” (TOT 467).

Plurality itself is not political in nature. Rather, as argued previously, it is ‘the *conditio sine qua non*’ or ‘the *conditio per quam*—of all political life’ (HC 7). This condition is inherent in authentic politics in and of itself<sup>249</sup>. Being inherent, the attempt to eliminate it is destructive and best results in the death of the person. When it comes to moral acts, plurality is not a ‘*conditio sine qua non*’. Rather, it becomes a personal affair. This is because moral acts have to be free acts, performed by the individual because they want to. Morally bad or evil acts, meaning acts that are bad in themselves are disapproved by reason. They are actions that man naturally identifies as wrong. Regardless of whether an action is right or wrong, they are imputable to the performer of the act if freely done. This means that the performer takes responsibility for the act and cannot blame someone else. It also does not matter that several persons perform the same act or that it was performed in the public sphere or in private. Each individual or performer takes responsibility for what they each have done. Since moral acts are imputable they are personal as opposed to political acts to which plurality is inherent and are carried out in the *polis* – the ones of interest in as far as radical evil is concerned.

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<sup>249</sup> It is noteworthy that Kateb is of the idea that the advantages of the human condition “are not political in nature. The advantages of pure politics are not political.” (Kateb, G. “Political Action: It’s Nature and Advantages,” pg. 144)

### 3.2.3 Eradicating initiative

For Arendt, apart from plurality, natality is another factor that constitutes authentic political action that is inherent in man. As was seen, there can be no authentic *polis* and therefore no authentic political action without it.

With radical evil, it is not the bodily existence by which men were distinguished, but rather the distinction being referred to “rests on initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human” (HC 176). In other words, without initiative in speech and action, there is no ‘humaness’ left. Arendt goes on to say that, “A life without speech and 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) For Arendt,

“action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is of acting (...) natality, is inherent in all human activities.” (HC 9)<sup>250</sup>

The capacity of acting implies the capacity to perform any act, including an act that is evil. Since this capacity is inherent, then all acting beings are beings that may perform acts that are evil. i.e. any being<sup>251</sup> may act evilly. She said “The Nazis are men like ourselves” (EU 134) meaning that those who committed such evil crimes were not extraordinary but plain ordinary men. Here one must note that this does not mean that the

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<sup>250</sup> Fry writes extensively about this in her article entitled “Natality” (Fry, K. (2014), “Natality”, pg. 23-35).

<sup>251</sup> Being here refers to human being. Only men are moral subjects so only human acts may be good or evil.

acting individuals themselves are evil. The above is only in reference to their acts. This is why she cautions about the importance of “identifying man’s capacity for evil and the problem of evil as such” (EU 134).

Once an evil act is initiated, like any authentic political action, its extent and effects are unpredictable and vast in nature due to natality. Since political acts are unpredictable then so are evil and radically evil acts. Because action has the value of natality, meaning that each unique act is new and free, then consequently, morality is also unpredictable.

Morality as was seen with the case of plurality, depends on the object, the end and, the circumstances together but the act itself is revealing of the performer of the act. In other words, morality itself is unpredictable but whenever one acts, they are disclosed<sup>252</sup> either as a doer of good acts or of bad acts depending on the three factors above. Morality cannot be predicted beforehand but only after the performance of the act.

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<sup>252</sup> At a different level, she claims that this manifestation of the *who* someone is ‘retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression’ (HC 181). Meaning that the ‘who’ that is revealed cannot really be put into words. Instead, we end up with a description of qualities or a kind of character of the person, which in itself only describes “what” someone is. The result, she claims, is that the individual’s ‘specific uniqueness escapes us’ (ibid.). Much as these qualities pertain to the described individual, they can and are shared by other individuals and so they are not specifically unique to that particular individual. This means that we have not actually defined him. Arendt says, “the impossibility, as it were, to solidify in words the living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech, has great bearing upon the whole realm of human affairs, where we exist primarily as acting and speaking beings.” (HC 181). The actual definition of man is out of the scope of this study.

What the action itself reveals according to Arendt, corresponds to the actor and this disclosure is almost involuntary<sup>253</sup>.

“The disclosure of the ‘who’ through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process... (T)he results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.” (HC 184)

In the strict sense, it was seen earlier that Arendt is of the view that no one can truly claim authorship of an action since all action is the reaction of some prior action and so on *ad infinitum*. This would mean that in the strictest sense, the agent cannot be disclosed since in reality it is not his original action nor reaction. In the same way, neither can an agent be held fully responsible of the action’s final outcome. This is why she claims that “we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, (...) we never can point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome.” (HC 185)

She also says, “the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer” (HC 184). This is what she claims, has ‘baffled political philosophy from its beginning in antiquity’ (ibid.). This is where the importance of history comes in as well as context. It is why she declares,

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<sup>253</sup> For Arendt, the “agent revealing capacity” (HC 182) is always retained. To Jaspers fundamentally, the deliberate choice or decision to disclose oneself held greater importance, for Arendt, disclosure was almost involuntary.

“*Who* someone is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero – his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only *what* he is or was.” (HC 186).

This is precisely what she had said at the beginning; we can never get to explain *who* someone is but only describe him as *what*. Hence there is no contradiction. This explanation does not rule out the fact that action has; ‘specific revelatory quality’ (HC 187, 180) which refers to the individual agent much as it is tied within the living web of the actions of others (ibid.).

“inevitably (...) men disclose themselves as subjects, as distinct and unique persons, even when they wholly concentrate upon reaching an altogether worldly, material object.” (HC 183)

In the same manner, an action may be revealing of the actor but it is also possible that the revelation is not genuine. Men do not always act in such a way as to decisively show who one’s true self is.

She also cautions that this disclosure is not genuine when “human togetherness is lost”, “when men go into action and use means of violence in order to achieve certain objectives for their own side and against the enemy”, or they use speech to achieve an end (HC 180). This is because as was seen; “disclosure comes only from the deed itself, and this achievement, like other achievements, cannot disclose the ‘who’ the unique and distinct identity of the agent.” (ibid.) That “disclosure comes only from the deed itself” implies that the morality of the act itself as well as the morality of the actor are closely related. Here again we have being and appearing coinciding. The point however, is that the morality

of the act with regard to natality in relation to the act being evil is unpredictable since it may or may not be a genuine revelation of the acting agent in the strict sense.

Another important factor about the nature of natality is that actions and reactions continue regardless of who actually started them. This implies the possibility of unintended consequences resulting. Arendt herself has said that, “he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes ‘guilty’ of consequences he never intended or even foresaw” (HC 233). This could provide an explanation for evil actions but it is certainly not the principal explanation and only remotely explains the *why* of the evil act.

In *The Human Condition*, she speaks of a desire to “escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents” and explains that, “Generally speaking, they always amount to seeking shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end.” (HC 220) This method of dominion over action by isolating oneself from all the others, and the temptation “to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents” (ibid.) is not new<sup>254</sup> but has been proposed as a solution

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<sup>254</sup> Arendt relates it to an “attempt to replace acting with making is manifest in the whole body of argument against ‘democracy’, which, the more consistently and better reasoned it is, will turn into an argument against the essentials of politics.” (HC 220)

throughout history (ibid.)<sup>255</sup>. It is a different means of dealing the unpredictability of action mentioned at the beginning of this thesis. However, this ‘solution’ has a danger that comes with it, namely that it results in the ‘attempt to replace acting with making’ (HC 223). In this, she accuses Plato of being the “first to introduce the division between those who know and do not act and those who act and do not know, (...) so that knowing what to do and doing it became two altogether different performances” (HC 223). The separation was such that “he who knows does not have to do and he who does needs no thought or knowledge.” (Ibid.)<sup>256</sup>

One could further argue that once an evil act has been initiated, only evil succeeding reactions would inevitably evolve and continue to be evil *ad infinitum*. To this Arendt would respond that due to natality this cannot be so. “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted.” (HC 247) Since man is capable of beginning action, he is equally capable of interrupting this cycle. Meaning that he has the ability to interrupt an evil act and start a new good act thereby beginning a new cycle of this time good actions and reactions. This does not mean that an evil act becomes a good act.

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<sup>255</sup> She provides an in-depth explanation of how this solution was introduced into politics especially by Plato and Aristotle who erroneously held the notion that “every political community consists of those who rule and those who are ruled” (HC 222). The error begun in Plato’s *Statesman*, where he “opens a gulf between the two modes of action, *archein* and *prattein* (‘beginning’ and ‘achieving’), which according to Greek understanding were interconnected.” (HC 222) According to Arendt, Plato wanted “to make sure that the beginner would remain the complete master of what he had begun, not needing the help of others to carry it through.” (ibid.)

<sup>256</sup> María Fátima Lobo (2013) writes elaborately about evil as a result of the separation between thought and action. (Lobo, M. F., (2013) *Hannah Arendt y la pregunta por la relación entre el pensamiento y la acción*. Editorial Biblos, pgs. 22-29.)

As has been seen, it is a newly initiated act. This is the ‘fact of natality’ referred to in the quote above ‘beginning anew.’ It was also seen in subsection 2.4 entitled “Moderation of Political Action.”

As Arendt questions evil, she continuously dwells on the issue of superfluosity as a means used by the totalitarian regime to convert men into superfluous beings. This completely goes against natality which is precisely an inherent quality of men in which they, as individuals, have the ability to freely act and react at will. This attempt went against man’s ‘condition of human existence’ (HC 11, BPF 61) and it attempted the – up until then – ‘impossible’ (TOT 459). The result of which she referred to as radical evil and unforgivable and unpunishable evil at that, as was seen previously in the second chapter of this work.

Meaning it had gone way beyond what anyone could ever have imagined. Further, it is all men who were made equally superfluous, the manipulators of the system as well who believed in their own superfluosity and who were “all the more dangerous because they did not care if they themselves are dead or alive, if they ever lived or never were born” (TOT 459). This is why it was so total and why so radical.

Arendt warns that “totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man.” (TOT 459) It serves as a warning to today’s political societies who ought to heed it especially where terror is the capital means used to rule the masses.

Nonetheless, Arendt affirms that “total terror, the essence of totalitarian government, (...) can be slowed down and is slowed down almost inevitably by the freedom of man, which even totalitarian rulers cannot deny, for this freedom (...) is identical with the fact that men are being

born and that therefore each of them *is* a new beginning, begins, in a sense, the world anew.” (TOT 466)

### 3.2.4 Radical evil and freedom

As previously seen in Chapter 1, subsection 1.6, natality is the beginning of something new on our own initiative (*archein*<sup>257</sup>) because our actions are *initium*<sup>258</sup> as Arendt is prone to quote from Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*<sup>259</sup>. This is why Arendt says, “Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.” (HC 177). Initiative implies spontaneity which in turn implies freedom.<sup>260</sup> That is why it is often said that “natality” is associated with the potential for doing something unprecedented<sup>261</sup>. Just as men take initiative, so do men have the possibility to do the unanticipated as seen above and thus to do evil. In Arendt’s thinking therefore, if one does evil, it is because one has taken the initiative to do evil. If the initiative, is taken freely, then it is taken spontaneously without coercion.

In Chapter 2, subsection 2.5 it was seen that spontaneous action is authentic action because it is free action, and the more spontaneous the action, the more authentically human. For Arendt, “action and politics, among all the capabilities and potentialities of human life, are the only

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<sup>257</sup> Greek term for beginning indicates “to begin,” “to lead,” and eventually “to lead”, to set something in motion. (HC 177)

<sup>258</sup> [*Initium*] *ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* is the full phrase. In Arendt’s later work, when she refers to this phrase, she usually only cites the term *initium*.

<sup>259</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1997, xii. 20.

<sup>260</sup> Refer to Chapter 2, subsection 2.5 of this work.

<sup>261</sup> Hinchmann, L.P. & Hinchmann, S.K. (1991). “Existentialism Politicized: Arendt’s Debt to Jaspers.” In Hinchmann, L., & Hinchmann, S. K. (Ed.). *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (pp. 143-178). 1994, pg. 150.

things of which we could not even conceive without at least assuming that freedom exists” (BPF 146). Spontaneity is a quality that is inherent in man. It was shown previously how spontaneity, freedom and natality are closely linked. All of them are inherent and all of them are human conditions. The next question would be; How can one take initiative to do evil and radical evil at that?

To attempt to answer this question, it will be best to begin with radical evil itself, which is the elimination of spontaneity in man and rendering him superfluous. First, the elimination of spontaneity. Arendt writes that without action to bring into play the new beginning of which each man is capable by virtue of being born, there is no new thing under the sun (HC 204). This would mean that the world would stagnate without action. Its dynamism would be lost and what would the world be then? Men must act. It is part and nature of their being. At the same time, it is necessary for others that men act. Due to the human condition of plurality, men need other men to act because men are enmeshed in a “web of relationships” and “man’s inability to rely upon himself” because the world’s “reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all” (HC 244).

This idea, made manifest in her dissertation written in the mid 1920s, was grafted as a well-developed concept of natality as she grew older and is clearly described in *The Human Condition*, as was seen in depth in the first chapter of this work. As quoted above, beginning, politically, is identical with man’s freedom. For Arendt, freedom is an attribute of action (BPF 155). It was also seen how to Arendt ‘to be free and to act are the same’<sup>262</sup> (BPF 153) and “The *raison d’être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action.” (BPF 146) Meaning that to be

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<sup>262</sup> This is in line with her continued appreciation of the need for being and appearing to coincide.

spontaneous is to act freely. This, for her, is intrinsically characteristic of human life.

The point here is that to eliminate spontaneity is to destroy freedom and therefore to destroy man himself as well as men together.<sup>263</sup> Not only is man (are men) destroyed, but the eradication of spontaneity will also come with the decomposition of political issues. This is because the web of relationships of man would also be destroyed. Both the intention to want to eliminate spontaneity and the act itself are evil and result in evil. In the same way, to remove freedom is to remove natality. Since both are inherent in man, to ‘remove’ them is to destroy man. This is because to remove that which is inherent, is to attempt to tackle with the very nature of man’s being.

In like manner, to eliminate spontaneity means to eliminate that which makes man to be human. Plurality, freedom, action, natality and individuality are precisely the essential conditions that make man to be what he is. All of these are affected when spontaneity is tampered with. For Arendt, the meaning of this is much more profound since it goes to the core of what for her makes man human. The core is the *radix* hence her use of the term ‘radical’.

The result of killing this inner spontaneity is the death of social and political activities along with it. In the concentration camps, they tested changes in human nature. Here, Arendt stressed, suffering was ‘not the main issue, nor the number of victims’ (TOT 458–459). Human nature as such was at stake since they were “creating a society in which the nihilistic banality of *homo homini lupus* is consistently realised” (TOT 459). Such conditioning is tragic for anyone trying to live in a humane

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<sup>263</sup> Refer to prior reflection on human action covered in Chapter 2 for a more detailed explanations.

way. It goes against the recognition of one's fellows as humans. Logically it would follow that if my fellow is not human then neither am I. Anything human that I cannot pertain to myself can therefore also not be pertained to another. Not even that which is innate to man such as human dignity.

“... it is necessary for totalitarianism to destroy every trace of what we commonly call human dignity. For human dignity implies the recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or co-builders of a common world.” (TOT 459)

This answers the question of the role played by totalitarian regimes and point of killing spontaneity – the destruction of human dignity. The result was a collapse in both moral and social activities along with the collapse of man *qua* man; the destruction of what is naturally human, as well as the loss of the meaning of individual action.

### 3.2.5 Radical evil and responsibility

When men act, the actual act is attributed to the individual. In like manner, as individuals they take on responsibility for their actions, depending on their moral value. Everything that one does, all human actions, have a moral dimension. She affirms this again years later in her article, “What is Freedom?” wherein she claim that “all acting contains an element of virtuosity” (BPF 153), an article that we shall come back to shortly. The concept of responsibility seems to have been of greater interest not in her early years but in the 1940s when she begun analysing the occurrence of WWII. This is evidenced in the fact that there is no mention of the term in her dissertation. In 1945, she published in *Jewish Frontier*, No. 12, an article entitled “German Guild” which later was published as “Organised Guilt and Universal Responsibility” in *Essays*

in *Understanding* as well as in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*<sup>264</sup>. In this article she describes the political conditions which underlie the charge of the collective guilt of the German people (EU 124). How some Germans took responsibility upon themselves without any visible proof of guilt while others became guilty without being in the least responsible (ibid.). The problem with this is that “Where all are guilty, nobody in the last analysis can be judged.” (EU 125)

One cannot truly take responsibility if there is no knowledge that what one is doing is wrong. However, once Hitler had been exposed, as well as his evil intentions, continued support would indeed mean supporting evil. This is why to her, those responsible must include “all those who continued to be sympathetic to Hitler as long as it was possible, who aided his rise to power, and who applauded him in Germany and in other European countries” (ibid.). The point is that in order to take responsibility, one must know that what they are doing or intend to do is wrong but still do or want to do it<sup>265</sup>. Such people, she claims, “were co-responsible for Hitler’s crimes” (EU 126). She also accuses them of the “inability to judge modern political organisation” (ibid., 125) much as the crime of administrative mass murder has no political solution.

When politics became a part of social life as was previously explained, society emancipated itself completely from public concerns such that the non-persecuted citizens were unable to tell right from wrong while the persecuted citizens were unable to choose an act be it good or evil since all this was made superfluous. Meaning they were not free and without free will one cannot take responsibility (TOT 80).

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<sup>264</sup> Arendt, H. (1945) “Organised Guilt and Universal Responsibility.” In Baehr, P. (Ed.) *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (pp.146-156), USA: Penguin.

<sup>265</sup> Aristotle explains that an agent acts involuntarily if he is ignorant. (Aristotle, 1987 pg. 32)

Further, Arendt gives an explanation of “the real motives which caused people to act as cogs in the mass-murder machine” (EU 124). She describes the classic individuals who functioned in this Nazi system as needed who were able to assume such motives to actually ‘want’ to be evil;

“He is a ‘bourgeois’ with all the outer aspect of respectability, all the habits of a good *paterfamilias* who does not betray his wife and anxiously seeks to secure a decent future for his children; (...) not (...) fanatics, nor adventurers, nor sex maniacs, nor sadists, but first and foremost jobholders, and good family men (...). transformed under the pressure of the chaotic economic conditions of our time<sup>266</sup> into an involuntary adventurer, who for all his industry and care could never be certain what the next day would bring. The docility of this type was already manifest in the very early period of Nazi ‘*Gleichschaltung*.’ It became clear that for the sake of his pension, his life insurance, the security of his wife and children, such a man was ready to sacrifice his beliefs, his honour, and his human dignity. It needed only the Satanic genius of Himmler to discover that after such degradation he was entirely prepared to do literally anything when the ante was raised and the bare existence of his family was threatened. The only condition he put was that he should be fully exempted from responsibility for his acts.” (EU 128-129)

Above, we have the full description of the making of an Eichmann; a desperate family man who if the existence of his family was threatened would do anything requiring only to be fully exempted from taking responsibility for his acts. This is why it was possible to have people who having admitted committing murder, could be incapable of

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<sup>266</sup> Referring to the times of WWII in the mid 1940s.

recognising their crime<sup>267</sup> and were thus incapable of taking responsibility for their acts of crime against humanity. According to Arendt, “They felt (...) only the responsibility toward their own families.” And that these men had been turned from responsible members of society, into a ‘bourgeois’ concerned only with his private existence (EU 129) who “worried about nothing so much as his security” (EU 128). This was his one main weakness that was manipulated. This is the modern man who ‘our time has produced’ who if held to account for what he did, would feel nothing except betrayed. She goes on to say that such men, once they become conscious that they “were not only a functionary but also a murderer” (EU 130) would not rebel but would find suicide as the only way out (ibid.).

In her Answers to Questions Submitted by Samuel Grafton in a 1963 previously unpublished letter she explains,

“In other words, the more superficial someone is, the more likely he will be to yield to Evil. An indication of such superficiality was the use of clichés. And Eichmann, God knows, was a perfect example.” (JW 479–480)

It is this superficiality that easily causes one to yield to evil, that is the *Banality of evil*.

### 3.3 Banality of evil

Going back to a 1946 letter that Arendt wrote to Jaspers on 17<sup>th</sup> of August, she is against his definition of “Nazi policy as a crime (‘criminal guilt’)” claiming that “it strikes me as questionable” (AJC 54). Rather,

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<sup>267</sup> Refer to the dialogue she reproduces in *Essays in Understanding*, page 127 of an imaginary dialogue described by an American correspondent for the *Jewish Telegraph Agency* and broadcaster for the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*. (EU 127)

she says,

“The Nazi crimes, it seems to me, explode the limits of the law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness. For these crimes, no punishment is severe enough. (...) That is, this guilt, in contrast to all criminal guilt, oversteps and shatters any and all legal systems. We are simply not equipped to deal with, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue” (AJC 54)

Above, we again have Arendt’s understanding of the unfathomable greatness of the evil implied, such that for her, the term ‘crime’ is inadequate because it is beyond that. Jaspers wrote to Arendt on 19<sup>th</sup> October, in response to her letter. In it, he disputes her reference of the Nazi ‘crime’ as being incomprehensible. Rather, for him, what the Nazis did can be comprehended as ‘crime’. He says,

“I’m not altogether comfortable with your view, because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of ‘greatness’ – of satanic greatness – which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the ‘demonic’ element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total banality, in their prosaic triviality, because that’s what truly characterises them.” (AJC 62)

In a footnote to this very phrase, it is commented that it is highly likely that this phrase served to inspire her to title her report on the Eichmann trial as she did<sup>268</sup>. In a letter dated 13<sup>th</sup> December, 1963 that Karl Jaspers

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<sup>268</sup> This was suggested in AJC as a footnote as well as Bernstein in his book, *Radical Evil* in a footnote (no. 26) where he comments on the same passage quoted above. (Bernstein, R.J. (2002) *Radical Evil*, pg.268, fn. 26)

writes to Arendt, he says

“Alcopy told me that Heinrich<sup>269</sup> suggested the phrase ‘banality of evil’ and is cursing himself for it now because you’ve had to take the heat for what he thought of. Perhaps the report isn’t true, or my recollection of it is garbled. I think it’s a wonderful inspiration and right on the mark as the book’s subtitle. The point is that *this* evil, not evil per se, is banal.” (AJC 542)

There is no written proof of where she really got this phrase from or if she was influenced by someone else’s use it. Perhaps knowing this is not so crucial since she herself describes the term and what she implies by her use it. Jaspers himself clarifies that “*What* evil is stands *behind* your phrase characterising Eichmann.” (AJC 542) The fact remains that the expression ‘Banality of Evil’, appeared in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem, The Banality of Evil*. The book was first published by *The New Yorker* Arendt's report on Eichmann trial. In April 11<sup>th</sup> – May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1961, Arendt travelled to Jerusalem to cover the trial and then again from 20<sup>th</sup> through 23<sup>rd</sup> June of 1961. Manuscript was delivered in October 1962 and first published between 16<sup>th</sup> Feb and 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1963 in a five-part article. She closely followed the trial, and as has always been her habit, it may be safely assumed that she wrote or took notes so as not to forget things as she admitted she was prone to do in an interview with Gunter.

It is this very report that provoked a great deal of havoc ranging from attacks on her motives, her thinking, her character, and her person, to the nature and style of the "report" itself. A clarification of what she really meant when using this phrase is thus vital for any further discussion. She herself realised this was so and had the courage to embark on an attempt

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<sup>269</sup> Supposedly he is referring to her husband Heinrich Blücher.

to explain in her own way, what she meant when she used the phrase. She also attempted to understand what it was that had not been understood and later she tried to understand why people found it hard to accept what she had written.

In a postscript that Arendt wrote to a later edition of the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she wrote that, “Even before its publication, this book became both the centre of a controversy and the object of an organised campaign.”<sup>270</sup> She says that the campaign launched was such that the actual controversy ‘was somehow swallowed up by and drowned’<sup>271</sup> by it. Meaning that the actual content of the book hardly got the necessary attention nor criticism.

Both Jews and non-Jews either agreed or disagreed over the correct definition and meaning of the subtitle as did some New Yorkers, Germans, Israelis, Swiss and French. What is disappointing she says, is that ‘the clamour (was) centred on the “image” of a book which was never written (JW 485) and touched upon subjects that often had not only not been mentioned by me but had never occurred to me before.’<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Arendt, H. (1972). “On Hannah Arendt”, pgs. 310-311.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> In some instances, she was accused of things that had been wrongly interpreted. She says that, “While these issues had indeed some connection with this book, although they were inflated out of all proportion, there were others which had no relation to it whatsoever.” (EU 284) She goes on to explain that ‘the book itself dealt with a sadly limited subject’ (EU 285).

(EU 283) In as far as she was concerned, the report ‘dealt with nothing but the extent to which the court in Jerusalem succeeded in fulfilling the demands of justice.’ (EU 298) Not that Eichmann committed banal acts, nor that all of us have an Eichmann living in us<sup>273</sup>. She never said any of this neither did she mean any of this. They are simply misinterpretations of

The explanation that she gives for the controversial reactions to her book is the possibility that not only Germans but Jews all over the world had “not forgotten this great catastrophe” (EU 283) and had “been unable to come to terms with it” (ibid.) and that even “less unexpected (...) general moral questions, with all their intricacies and modern complexities, which I would never have suspected would haunt men’s minds today and weigh heavily on their hearts, stood suddenly in the foreground of public concern.” (ibid.) In other words, implying a guilty conscience (ibid.).

Other than the guilty conscience, one has to bear in mind that in this report, Arendt challenges a view that has been held traditionally (LMT 3) as to what someone capable of radical evil would look like. In *The Life of the Mind, Thinking*, she says,

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She goes on to say that “The report of a trial can discuss only the matters which were treated in the course of the trial, or which in the interests of justice should have been treated.” (ibid.) She then goes on to explain that “The focus of every trial is upon the person of the defendant, a man of flesh and blood with an individual history, with an always unique set of qualities, peculiarities, behaviour patterns, and circumstances. All the things that go beyond that, such as the history of the Jewish people in the dispersion, and of anti-Semitism, or the conduct of the German people and other peoples, or the ideologies of the time and the governmental apparatus of the Third Reich, affect the trial only insofar as they form the background and the conditions under which the defendant committed his acts.” (EU 285)

<sup>273</sup> Arendt, H., *On Hannah Arendt*, pg. 308.

“Evil, we have learned, is something demonic; its incarnation is Satan, (...), or Lucifer (...). Evil men, we are told, act out of envy... Or they may be prompted by weakness (...). Or, on the contrary, by the powerful hatred wickedness feels for sheer goodness...or by covetousness, ‘the root of all evil’ (*Radix omnium malorum cupiditas*). However, what I was confronted with was utterly different and still undeniably factual. I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer that made it impossible to trace the uncontested evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives, the deeds were monstrous, but the doer (...) was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous.” (LMT 3-4)

In other words, when one came face to face with Eichmann, there was no denying the fact that the man had nothing to do with the act if one were to follow this traditional outlook. It simply did not hold despite the fact that this is a belief that people have held since time immemorial. What Arendt did in her report, was to affirm that a diabolic character of the perpetrator was not necessary and neither did one have to be a psychopath. This is why, in a lecture that she gave in the mid 1960s entitled “Thinking and Moral Considerations”, Arendt termed evil deeds committed on a gigantic scale, that cannot be traced to any particularity of wickedness, pathology or ideological conviction in the doer, whose only personal distinction was a perhaps extraordinary shallowness, as the factual phenomenon of *The Banality of Evil* (RJ 159).

Eichmann was the perfect example of this. He was a mediocre man and a normal human being – *hostis generis humani* (EU 276). She describes him saying that he was ‘terrifyingly normal’, ‘neither perverted nor sadistic’ (EU 276) and therefore without motives and without convictions against the Jewish people. She herself admits that she was

disappointed by the man himself. “the wish to expose myself – not to the deeds, which, after all, were well known, but to the evildoer himself – probably was the most powerful motive in my decision to go to Jerusalem.” (JW 475) She was driven to go see him with her own eyes so to speak but the nature of evil and the man himself did not coincide. To Arendt, the man himself was simply not demonic nor of demonic nature in as far as she could perceive (ibid.). Stating this observation is one of the main reasons that caused public uproar about her use of this phrase – the *banality of evil*. The use of this very phrase as the title of her book was not received well especially by the Jewish society who seem to have misunderstood the term in as far as Arendt meant it to be understood.<sup>274</sup> Jaspers himself commented, “You have reached a point where many people no longer understand you.” (AJC 525)<sup>275</sup> It therefore

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<sup>274</sup> Many misinterpreted Arendt’s use of the term *banal* to mean commonly occurring evil. Young-Bruehl points out that when Arendt used the term banal, she did not mean commonly occurring but commonplace as can be seen from her writings. (Young-Bruehl, E., “From the Pariah’s Point of View: Reflections on Hannah Arendt’s Life and Work,” pg. 17). She rightly claims that Arendt spoke of this man’s thoughtless evildoing as ‘banal’. (Arendt, H. (1972). “On Hannah Arendt”, pg. 336) She also claims that Arendt realised that this could not be explored “without a full-scale treatise on the Mind.” (ibid.)

Benhabib claims, “A better phrase than the ‘banality of evil’ might have been the ‘routinization of evil’ or its *Alltäglichsung* (everydayness).” (ibid. 123)

Bergen interprets Arendt to mean that “Eichmann, like every human being, possessed the commonplace ability to see himself by thinking about the meaning of who he is.” (Bergen, B.J., (1998). *The banality of evil: Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution"*, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc *The banality of evil*, pg. 49)

<sup>275</sup> Nevertheless, much as he hails her “uncompromising desire for truth”, he reproaches her for her naivety when he says, “how infinitely naïve not to notice that the act of putting a book like this into the world is an act of aggression against ‘self-sustaining lies’. Where those lies are exposed and the names of those people who live these lies are named, the meaning of those people’s existence itself is at stake. They react by becoming deadly enemies.” (AJC 531)

became very controversial not only because of the phrase used but against the book as a whole and against her person.

Public uproar against the banality of evil as a book was also due to the tone of voice that was used in the writings. Arendt admits in her interview with Günter Gaus, that the tone of voice used in the book “is predominantly ironic” (EU 16) but explains that such is “an objection against me personally. And I can’t do anything about that.” (EU 16) What she is saying is that the tone of voice used should ideally have no bearing on the actual content of what was written. What was written was factual and understandable and it is to this that people should have reacted. What is important is what she actually *did* say not *how* she said it. The question therefore is, what did she mean by the phrase *Banality of Evil*?

### 3.3.1 What it is not

Arendt, being the person that she is, took time to try to understand this ‘uproar’ and seeming rejection of what she had written. One of her reactions to this was to try to explain how one ought to read her account of the banality of evil and hope for a better understanding of what she had written. At the very beginning of her book, LMT, she says,

“In my report of it (Eichmann in Jerusalem) I spoke of ‘the banality of evil.’ Behind that phrase, I held no thesis or doctrine, although I was dimly aware of the fact that it went counter to our tradition of thought – literary, theological or philosophic – about the phenomenon of evil.” (LMT 3)

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Cf. According to Bernstein, Arendt was not naïve regarding the barbarous sadism and rabid anti-Semitism of many Nazis. (Bernstein, R.J., (2002). *Radical Evil*, pg. 227).

To begin with, she cautions against any thesis or doctrine in relation to the phrase. This was not her aim as some had interpreted her to have done and so resulted in misunderstanding her report. Her caution is thus that, these should be avoided. The other thing that comes out is the fact that she was aware, albeit dimly, that using the phrase went counter to what had always been understood by the phenomenon of evil, at least traditionally, but she still went ahead and used it. Implying that she actually *wanted* to use the phrase because to her it was adequate and properly described what she wanted to say.

One of the main ways Arendt explains, that one should read this report in order to have understood her, is to read it on the strictly factual level. Below is the citation of where she states this. It is lengthy but serves to explain her purpose regarding the use of the phrase;

“I also can well imagine that an authentic controversy might have arisen over the subtitle of the book; for when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial (...). Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post (...). In principle, he knew quite well what it was all about (...). He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. And if this is "banal" and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace. It surely cannot be so common." (EJ 287-288)

Again, she points out that her writing was neither an explanation nor a

theory – it was a report from which one could have learnt a lesson; How simple men can act atrociously without seemingly being aware of it. Eichmann excused himself on the ground that he was just a functionary doing only what was ‘statistically’ expected of him (EU 289). Arendt explains that this is the essence of totalitarian governments. This is what they do – produce functionaries – and thus ‘dehumanise them’ (EU 289) so Eichmann’s claims were right. He *was* doing what was expected of him. This is no excuse and Arendt is aware of this. In fact, she herself says that doing what is expected of you does not excuse the evil act nor wipe it off the slate (EU 289). If the act is wrong then one should be called to account much as a crime may take place within a “legal” order.

Therefore, what she highlights, is the fact that Eichmann had ‘no motives at all’, that ‘he was not stupid’, and the fact that ‘it was sheer thoughtlessness’ that ‘predisposed him’ to become this great criminal. Furthermore, there was ‘no diabolic or demonic profundity’. This is what she found to be so banal – this as well as the fact that ‘such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness<sup>276</sup> can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man’ (EU 289).

She also says that the use of the term banal was not to trivialise the radical evil that *had* occurred as some accused her of doing. Venmans (2005) claims that the term ‘banality’ was nothing but a synonym that had a more attractive ring to it than ‘lack of reflection’. He also claims that the word Arendt had in mind was *Gedankenlosigkeit*.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> A lot more shall be said about this shortly in a separate section to give it due attention.

<sup>277</sup> Venmans, P., (2005), *El mundo según Hannah Arendt*, pg. 155.

In a 1964 interview that she held with Thilo Koch on the Eichmann case and the Germans, Arendt refers to the 'Banality of Evil' as 'the greatest catastrophe of our century (JW 285). Here is what she has to say in relation to the two;

"Something banal is not therefore either trivial or all that common an occurrence. I can regard a thought or a feeling as banal even if no one has ever uttered such a thing before and its consequences lead to disaster" (JW 285).

Her independent spirit clearly comes out with this declaration to regard something as she sees fit regardless of whether it has been done before or if the 'consequences lead to disaster.' Therefore, going by what she says above in the 1964 interview, banal was what she thought and felt it was and that is why she termed it be such. This can be further seen when she claims that by 'banal' she does not mean 'commonplace', which is another of the accusations made against her because of the use of this term. In the long citation above (EJ 288), she mentions it as well. In her written answers that she submitted to Samuel Grafton, she tells him,

"You equate 'banal' with 'common-place,' and I am afraid you have the dictionaries on your side. For me, there is a very important difference: commonplace is what frequently, commonly happens, but something can be banal even if it is not common." (JW 470-471)

This clarification can be well understood despite what 'the dictionaries' may say. In her case, there is an important distinction as she points out. What is interesting is her insistence on her own interpretation and use of the term banal as she sees fit and in accord with her given definition of it. She does not take back what she says but insists on an explanation and justification of the use of the term.

Arendt was also misunderstood by her long-term friend, Gershom Scholem<sup>278</sup> as she makes clear in a letter that she wrote to him on 24 July, 1963. She writes, “Incidentally, I don't see why you call my term “banality of evil” a catchword or slogan. As far as I know no one has used the term before me; but that is unimportant. (JW 470-471)

There are several others that attacked her having misunderstood her.<sup>279</sup> In fact, it got so bad as can be seen from an article that Seyla Benhabib wrote entitled “Who's on Trial, Eichmann or Arendt?” for the *New York Times Opinionator*<sup>280</sup> addressing the same issue. There she gives a more detailed philosophical context of what Arendt meant by the use of the term and the misinterpretations of the other enraged philosophers who held it against Arendt for the use of the term and the ‘assumed’ application of the term which in their view, “allegedly diminishing Eichmann’s moral culpability for his role in the Holocaust” as Benhabib comments in this article. Kristeva says, “It is clear, then, that one would have to be operating in bad faith or be completely unfamiliar with Arendt’s earlier texts to claim that she somehow exonerated or trivialised Eichmann’s crimes.”<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> In her letters, she fondly refers to him as Gerhardt. This is an indicator of the closeness of their friendship. It is known that Arendt greatly valued her friendships. Gutiérrez claims it was the basic ingredient for her moral survival (Gutiérrez de Cabiedes, T., (2009) *El hechizo de la comprensión*, pg. 158)

<sup>279</sup> Dana Villa (2011) is of the view that it is possible that Arendt got Eichmann’s specific motivation wrong, nevertheless, the concept “remains crucial for understanding how it is that thousands of normal people, neither fanatical nor hate filled, are able to make themselves available for what the political theorist George Kateb has called ‘evil as policy’. (Villa, D., (1999) “Hannah Arendt: From Philosophy to Politics.” In *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, Zuckert, C.H., (Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pg.122.

<sup>280</sup> Benhabib, S. (21 September 2014) “Who’s on trial Eichmann or Arendt? In *The New York Times, Opinionator*.

<sup>281</sup> Kristeva, J. (2001) *Hannah Arendt*, pg. 144.

Berel Lang<sup>282</sup> claims that Arendt herself invited the hostile reaction to the theme because she “described the roles of a central figure in the holocaust as banal” because it reduced both the enormity of the deed as well as the culpability of those responsible for it.<sup>283</sup> Lang later explains that this is not what Arendt implied but that she was willing to risk people thinking it<sup>284</sup> thereby blaming it on her. Arendt never once said nor meant that Eichmann was banal. Neither was her conclusion that there is an “Eichmann in every one of us”<sup>285</sup> (EU 286) as she ironically states. This is not what she meant.

What Arendt *did* mean, is that when dealing with the concept *banality of evil*, it has to be understood strictly at the factual level that she described at the very beginning of this subsection. Practically all the misconceptions and misunderstandings regarding her use of the term can be dismissed on this basis alone.

There is another important factor that Arendt points out in order for one to understand her use of the term and that can be found at the very end of the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as a Postscript. There she writes that “The present report deals with nothing but the extent to which the court in Jerusalem succeeded in fulfilling the demands of justice” (EJ 298). This is on the factual level. Later, in the same Postscript she emphatically states all that it is not;

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<sup>282</sup> Lang, B. (1988). “Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Evil,” In Hinchmann, L., & Hinchmann, S. K., (Eds.) *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, pg. 46.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> One such author for example is Bernard J. Bergen (1998) Author of *The Banality of Evil*. as he clearly states in his preface (Bergen, B.J., (1998) *The banality of evil. Hannah Arendt and "The Final Solution"*, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, pg. ix.)

“This book, then, does not deal with the history of the greatest disaster that ever befell the Jewish people, nor is it an account of the Third Reich, nor is it, finally and least of all, a theoretical treatise on the nature of evil.” (EJ 285)

In other words, people had lost the main focus of the report<sup>286</sup>. It was a trial of a person who is an individual unique and distinguished from all other individuals as Arendt herself would have concluded given her political theory of plurality. She merely described events as she saw them including all she thought necessary and relevant to the circumstances surrounding the trial at the time (EJ 285-286). Being an individual, unique person herself, she had every right to do so as she saw appropriate.

### 3.3.2 The case of Eichmann

Adolf Eichmann was the man on trial – not all Nazis, not all of Germany and not anti-semitism in all its forms. In the interest of justice it was his guilt or innocence that was to be established at the trial. The point in case of this trial is that Eichmann was being accused of “an unprecedented crime” (EJ 267) and it is this specific case that Arendt wrote her report on. In the same way, when she used the phrase ‘banality of evil’ it was in reference to Eichmann and not to all the Nazis<sup>287</sup>.

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<sup>286</sup> In the postscript to the book, she writes, “Even before its publication, this book became both the center of a controversy and the object of an organized campaign. It is only natural that the campaign, conducted with all the well-known means of image-making and opinion-manipulation, got much more attention than the controversy, so that the latter was somehow drowned up by and swallowed up by and drowned in the artificial noise of the former.” (EJ 282)

<sup>287</sup> In the same way, one could argue that in the case of Hitler, it was not banal nor thoughtlessly committed crime. It is also arguable that some committed these crimes because they were truly sadistic or because they were true anti-Semites. None of these refer to Eichmann.

Neither was she presenting Eichmann as a representative perpetrator of the Nazis or other ‘collaborators’ of the Third Reich.

To Arendt, politically and legally, the crimes committed “were ‘crimes’ different not only in degree of seriousness but in essence” (EJ 267). Point being, it was not just any ‘crime’ that he was being accused of as has been seen in the description of what radically evil really was. There is the horrendous ‘crime’ and then there is Eichmann. Arendt describes him as ‘neither monstrous nor demonic’ (JW 475) and yet, despite his mediocrity, he was capable of monstrous deeds.

The problem is that people expected someone beastlike in the figure of Eichmann whom they set out to see and lay eyes upon, Arendt included. But the figure of Eichmann himself was disappointingly normal. In fact, she reports, “The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.” (EJ 276) “This, admittedly, was hard to take.” (EJ 25) People were unable to reconcile the man with the deeds.

Yet Arendt insisted on her interpretation of the man as she perceived him to be as well as the events surrounding the trial. It is, in fact admirable, the way she stood her ground given all the controversy she had to endure due to her perception of the man and the fact that she referred to it as banal. When asked if she would have changed what she said had she known about the controversy that would ensue as a result of the use of this phrase<sup>288</sup>, she says,

“once I wrote, I was bound to tell the truth as I saw it. I was not aware of the dangers. Would I have dodged the issues if I

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<sup>288</sup> The phrase being referred to is that of “Banality of evil.”

had known? This question is a very real one to me. I am not in politics, and I am neither willing nor able to deal with the situation that has arisen; it interferes very seriously with my work, and the publicity connected with it is for me and my way of life a first-rate nuisance. Still, because of the nature of my work and the task I have set for myself – What is the nature of evil? – I suppose I would have done it anyway and reported the trial on the factual level.” (JW, pg. 478)

Here we have Hannah Arendt in the first degree; telling the truth at all costs. Her search for the truth would not have stopped her from telling it ‘as it is’. She admits that this is no easy task given the nuisance of publicity, etc. The task that she had set for herself is that of the study of nature of evil. She admits that “I have been thinking for many years, or to be specific thirty years about the nature of evil.” (JW 475) It is not a search that she was willing to give up because of some ‘inconvenience’ however costly this might be given that it ‘interferes seriously with her work’. She will still have reported the case on the factual level. Now when Arendt talks about given facts, she implies given truths that cannot be altered regardless of who reports them, the times in which they are reported or the manner in which they are reported. Facts simply are and truth simply is.

Interestingly and coincidentally, this is another incident of Arendtian behaviour and way of being that sharply contrasts with Eichmann’s – Arendt’s fidelity to truth and to telling it as it is on one hand, while on the other hand, Eichmann preferred to deny fault and responsibility that led to the death of the Jews, by meticulously organising to have them transported to death camps.

Denying and shying away from truth is not something Arendt could take lightly since she herself was an ardent seeker of truth and of understanding it. It is in her truthfulness that she reported this trial.

The controversial truth about Eichmann that Arendt reported and which she held to be a factual truth is not his stupidity but his authentic inability to think (EJ 49, EU 289) as has been quoted previously. Looking at thinking in relation to radical evil is an unlikely but necessary digression that serves to explain how a 'mediocre' human being could end up committing atrocious acts, typical of the Third Reich, and as evidenced in the case of Adolf Eichmann.

Arendt is careful to distinguish between way of thinking and ability to think. Had Eichmann been physically unable to think, then he could not have been blamed for his crimes. However, this was not the case since his was not a case of dementia nor did he have a medical or mental condition.<sup>289</sup> If the problem was his way of thinking then one would have thought that it would at least be consistent, something that it was not as Arendt pointed out with regard to his lies, lack of memory and self-contradictory statements (EJ 49, 52-55, 63, 78, 80-82, 252).

The point is that it was hard for people to face the reality that Eichmann was neither demonic, nor the devil nor 'Lucifer in human form'<sup>290</sup> as Arendt herself has said, much as this would surprisingly have been easier to accept. What was so bothersome about him was the evident 'moral collapse' of an ordinary man who had no personal evil motives nor apparent hatred or antisemitism tendencies. Its banality!

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<sup>289</sup> Arendt reports that, "Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as 'normal'" with an "attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers, sisters, and friends" that was 'not only normal but most desirable.'" (EJ 25-26)

<sup>290</sup> Arendt claims that an Eichmann in the form of a fallen Lucifer would have been more appealing to the public. She said this in an interview that she held with Thilo Koch (JW 487).

### 3.4 Radical evil vs Banality of Evil

Using the earlier descriptions of radical evil as well as the prior descriptions of the banality of evil, it is of interest to analyse if, how and when Arendt relates them and if there is any contradiction in her doing so.

When Arendt analyses these notions on an ontological level, she admits that radical or absolute evil do not exist. She acknowledges that Augustine, Thomas and Kant are of the same idea and favours Thomas' explanation when she says, "Still, it is true that this old topos of philosophy makes more sense in Thomas than in most other systems because the centre of Thomas' system, its 'first principle,' is Being." (LMW 118). She says, "Evil is not a principle, because it is a sheer *absence*<sup>291</sup>" (ibid.). This she elaborates by quoting from Thomas Aquinas where he explains, "evil is an absence where something is *deprived*<sup>292</sup> of a good that belongs to it essentially"<sup>293</sup>. She goes on to explain that, "Because of its privative character, absolute or radical evil cannot exist. No evil exists in which one can detect 'the total absence of good.' For *if the wholly evil could be, it would destroy itself.*"<sup>294</sup> In other words, the wholly evil, which is complete absence of good would result in non-Being.

Therefore, ontologically speaking, radical or absolute evil cannot possibly exist. Given all prior explanations of Arendt's use of 'radical evil' it was made clear that Arendt does not consider this notion ontologically and also not on a metaphysical level. If anything, Arendt is

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<sup>291</sup> Emphasis added by Arendt.

<sup>292</sup> Emphasis added by Arendt.

<sup>293</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, bk. I, qu. 48, a. 3.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., qu. 5, a. 5; qu. 49, a. 3. Emphasis added by Arendt.

notoriously known for defying fundamental ontology and metaphysical arguments. Benhabib seems to agree to this and claims that Arendt's thinking is deeply grounded in a position which she terms "anthropological universalism"<sup>295</sup>. Formosa is in full agreement with this interpretation as is made clear in his article<sup>296</sup>. Thus, in the strictly ontological sense, radical evil does not exist and is incompatible with Arendt's notion because for her, it continues to be a reality.

In Formosa's article, he takes the position that radical evil is a *type of evil*<sup>297</sup> which involves "numerous perpetrators, undertaking numerous actions, which in combination have a certain cumulative effect that is radically evil" while in contrast, banality of evil refers to a *type of perpetrator* who "thoughtlessly perpetrates evil in certain circumstances, suffers from a remoteness from reality and does not possess a particularly pathological psychology."<sup>298</sup> Both descriptions are very much on point and they well explain Arendt's use of these notions. When interpreted like this there is no contradiction at all. Formosa comes to the same conclusion<sup>299</sup>.

Given the above interpretation implies that Arendt uses the phrase banality of evil to make a descriptive judgement of Eichmann, the

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<sup>295</sup> Benhabib, S. in her article, "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," says "*The Human Condition* treats human beings as members of the same natural species, to whom life on earth is given under certain conditions, namely those of natality, plurality, labour, work, and action. This philosophical anthropology proceeds from a level of abstraction which treats all forms of cultural, social, and historical differentiation among humans as irrelevant when measured up against the 'fundamentals' of their condition". (Benhabib, S. "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*." In Villa, D. R. (Ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Hannah Arendt*, pg 80)

<sup>296</sup> Formosa, P. (2007) "Is Radical Evil Banal? Is Banal Evil Radical?"

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

individual as has been seen in the previous sub-section. He is a type of perpetrator who performs a certain type of evil that is radical evil.

What is also interesting, is the observation that radical evil is an undertaking that requires the actions of many as well as the use of modern technology, both of which facilitated carrying out radical evil on such a large scale (HC 238; EJ 76). Organisational skills and large-scale technology are not necessary in the case of banal evil. Neither is there a need for many people as it affects the one and is merely descriptive.

It may thus be said that the concept of radical evil is independent of banality and that not all instances of banality of evil result in radical evil. Bernstein, however, argues that banality of evil “presupposes” radical evil.<sup>300</sup> By this he implies that the two are not independent because banality of evil ‘presupposes’ or comes before radical evil. However, from what has been seen before, the two are actually independent.

Bernstein then goes on to say that banality of evil is a “phenomenon exemplified by only some of the perpetrators of radical evil”<sup>301</sup>. Thereby implying that not all perpetrators of radical evil display Eichmann’s banality of evil. I would agree with this because as seen above, not all perpetrators lacked demonic profundity or evil motives.

Rather than claiming one to ‘presuppose’ the other, as Bernstein does, it would be more accurate to say that in a way both notions together result in a better contemporary understanding of evil. In that sense, they are complementary. When the two accounts of evil are understood together, as Arendt understood them, they provide a richer and fuller

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<sup>300</sup> Bernstein, R. J., (2002), *Radical Evil*, pg. 232.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

philosophical approach, as opposed to when they are considered separately.

All in all, Eichmann being a perpetrator, is guilty and therefore morally responsible for the acts that he committed. Much as he lacked diabolical profundity with regard to his motives, he was able to commit radical evil because of his banal thoughtlessness. What Eichmann did was commit radical evil but he himself was not a radically evil man neither did he have radically evil intentions from what could be seen. As Arendt pointed out, he was neither “demonic nor monstrous” (LMT 3-4). One could argue that this is contradictory. It would indeed be so if one were to follow the ‘tradition’ relation of evil motives with evil acts. That evil deeds presupposed evil intentions and evil motives (TOT 443). This is what Arendt defied and precisely what the Nazi aimed to do. Therefore, following the traditional notion that evil deeds presuppose evil intentions and motives, and basing arguments on a strictly ontological level, then there is indeed a contradiction.

On 24 July, 1963, Arendt wrote to her friend Gershom Scholem, a letter in which she makes an assertion that can be quite disconcerting because she says,

“You are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of ‘radical evil.’ It is a long time since we last met, or we would perhaps have spoken about the subject before (...). It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never ‘radical,’ that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is ‘thought- defying,’ as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its ‘banality.’” (JP 251)

What Arendt does in the above quote is, give a description of the nature of evil and this on an ontological level. When Arendt reported on the Eichmann trial, it was never on a philosophical but on a strictly factual level. When she writes this letter, it is in response to Scholem's in which he accuses Arendt's book of being a 'thesis' concerning the banality of evil, which "underlies (her) entire argument" (JP 245). She continues to stand by this definition in her article, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy", wherein she says, "The greatest evil is not radical, it has no roots, and because it has no roots it has no limitations, it can go to unthinkable extremes and sweep over the whole world." (RJ 95)

It has already been shown that Arendt denies that her report is a thesis but a factual account therefore, reasons mentioned by Scholem cannot 'underlie her entire argument'. He goes on to say,

"This new thesis strikes me as a catchword: it does not impress me, certainly, as the product of profound analysis—an analysis such as you gave us so convincingly, (...) in your book on totalitarianism... nothing remains but this slogan (...)." (JP 245)

His accusation that Arendt's 'banality of evil' is a 'shallow analysis', a 'catchword' or 'slogan', could be reason enough for her to write back giving a deeper account of what she had come to understand in as far as the nature of evil is concerned. Hence her description on a philosophical level. Using her philosophical description of radical evil would not sustain a philosophical description of banality of evil. In other words, it would be contradictory or at least it would cause tension as Beiner

claims.<sup>302</sup>

According to Young-Bruehl, when Arendt was faced by Eichmann, “She renounced the ‘radical evil’ notion with her idea that it was not a ‘radical’ or original fault but thoughtlessness that characterised Eichmann, who shared with all men ‘innate repugnance for crime’”<sup>303</sup>. In my opinion, the notion of radical evil was not ‘renounced’ but rather its nature in Eichmann was described and this on a descriptive level. Or put differently, in Eichmann, evil had taken a ‘banal’ form. In Arendt’s opinion as mentioned earlier, “such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man” (EJ 288).

In the same 1963 letter to Gershom Scholem mentioned earlier, Arendt remarks yet again that evil is thought defying and that therein lies its banality. She uses a similar description – “word-and-thought-defying” – in the very last sentence of her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, before the epilogue (EJ 252). This goes to show how baffling she thought the phenomenon to be and therefore, how vital it is for us in our times, to take a closer look at it in order to understand it and learn what we ought to have learnt from the Eichmann trial.

In summary, the nature of evil is something that has still not been fully understood nor fully explained. Arendt’s explanation of radical as well as that of the banality of evil, both need to be kept in perspective. Radical evil is closely related to an altering of the human condition while that of the banality of evil is closely linked to the case of

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<sup>302</sup> Beiner, R. “Arendt and Nationalism.” In Villa, D. R. (Ed.). *The Cambridge companion to Hannah Arendt* (pgs. 44-62). Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000 “Arendt and Nationalism,” pg. 56.

<sup>303</sup> Young-Bruehl, E., (1982), *Hannah Arendt For Love of the World*, pgs. 369–370.

Eichmann. Nevertheless, what is unchanging is her fight and defence for truth. Having observed Eichmann's 'thoughtlessness', Arendt was able to relate evil to thinking. This is also why the next task is that of an analysis of the relation of thought with evil..



## Chapter 4: Thinking the Unthinkable

After Arendt's report on the Eichmann trial and all the controversy that ensued, she was drawn to delve into a deeper understanding of the nature of evil in relation to thought. She thought about her report and what she had said about evil in it and why it had been received with such criticism. Arendt had to deal with both the reactions from the public as well as the issue of evil itself. In this chapter, it will be of interest to see how she dealt with the controversy and then how she reconciled radical evil and thoughtlessness.

### 4.1 The challenge of telling the truth

It is never easy to tell the truth especially if they are hard truths. This is one of the greatest challenges in today's political arena. Instead, people find it easier to lie. It is not uncommon in today's age that 'truths' are 'made true' through political and social power by appealing to emotion and personal belief as the main drives instead of truth, reality, statistical figures or data.<sup>304</sup> For some reason, men find it easier to appeal to emotions, to feeling and personal belief as well as other needs of the human mind.<sup>305</sup> These have become more attractive and the seemingly preferred choice in today's so called post-truth era.

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<sup>304</sup> Byarugaba, J. K. (2016). "Reflexivity between the Modern Society Concepts of Equality and Plurality: Their Transformation according to Arendt," pg. 201.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

Arendt reported on the Eichmann trial and this was no easy task as it meant the exposure of facts and events that would perhaps preferably best have been left untold and forgotten. The result was an outcry, mainly from the Jews implied who felt implicated and offended by this report. It has already been seen that Arendt had a thirst for truth and understanding and now that she had got a taste of it, she 'let go' and wrote her report regardless of the aftermath.

In as far as Arendt is concerned, when she wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she told nothing but the truth about the trial and what ensued there. When it comes to telling the truth, factual matters are of utmost importance in order for her to understand it. In a dedication to Karl Jaspers that was published in 1948, Arendt, referring to her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, wrote "I speak here only of factual matters as I see them, because one should never stray from the basis of fact without knowing what one is doing and why." (EU 213) With this, Arendt affirms the basic importance and role that factual matters play, in as far as she is concerned, starting with her report on the Eichmann trial and why she wrote it as she did. That is why she says, when speaking of her model, Karl Jaspers,

"What I learned from you and what helped me in the ensuing years to find my way around in reality (...) is that the only thing of importance is not philosophies but the truth, that one has to live and think in the open and not in one's shell, no matter how comfortably furnished it is" (EU 213)

A lot is implied in the above quoted text regarding truth. She does not confuse that which is correct with that which is convenient but sticks to the factual matters since these matters do not change. Above is a clear justification of Hannah Arendt always having been a strong advocator of truth. She has proclaimed it, tasted the bitter aftertaste of having done so

and, she has dealt with it – maintaining her ground as often as she had the need to despite arising consequences and at the risk of being misunderstood.<sup>306</sup> At times, she has done this to such an extent that she has come across as rude and even arrogant. One such case is clear in her interview with Günter Gaus where she says, “If I am to speak very honestly I would have to say: When I am working, I am not interested in how my work might affect people.” (EU 3)

Another instance of curtness or crudeness, can be seen where Arendt comments on Eichmann’s “supposed” ‘diminished moral culpability for his role in the Holocaust’ that was mentioned previously. It is an article in which she defended herself in a postscript to a later edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. There, one comes across phrases such as “ I had dismissed that question as *silly* and *cruel*, since it testified to a *fatal ignorance* of the conditions at the time” (EU 283 emphasis added), or the tone and way in which she defends herself in the following statement:

“This was the unexpected conclusion certain reviewers chose to draw from the ‘image’ of a book, created by certain interest groups, in which I allegedly had claimed that the Jews had murdered themselves. And why had I told such a monstrous implausible lie? Out of ‘self-hatred,’ of course.” (EU 284)

Arendt’s irritation came across in her writings. But for a person who perhaps has suffered injustice as a Jew at the hands of the Nazis, her less than apologetic tone as well as her seemingly crude manner may

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<sup>306</sup> For instance, Steinberg has a completely different interpretation of the reading of *The Human Condition* in which he accuses Arendt of deliberately converting “Nazism and the mass enslavement and mass murder of Jews into phenomena that are disconnected from modern German political history” (Steinberg, J. (2000) *Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust*, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, pg. 233)

certainly be justified to some extent. The point is that her primary interest was in understanding and stating the truth, without caring too much about how it may come across.

What is also admirable is her endeavour to understand and not simply accept events and facts as given and unchangeable. A little later on in the same dedication to Jasper, she writes, “I have not accepted the world created by those facts as necessary and indestructible.” (EU 213) This shows how important truth is to her as well as her effort to go further and deeper in order to truly understand it well and not simply accept facts necessarily as a given.

#### 4.1.1 Need to understand for reconciliation

Hannah Arendt’s need to understand was there from early on, as has already been seen (EU 8). It is the same desire or need that led her to read Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as well as his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* as a young teenager<sup>307</sup>. She also read Jasper’s *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* and Kierkegaard at around this time. In as far as she was concerned, “I had this need to understand” (EU 8). This need never left her and her quest for it were both ardent and diligent. For instance, in a 1964 interview she says, “I want to understand. And if others understand – in the same sense that I have understood – that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home.” (EU 3) Here one sees that her desire to understand was not only in a selfish way but that when she wrote or published, it was with a hope that someone else would understand as she had understood. Otherwise, why would she have bothered to publish?

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<sup>307</sup> Arendt, H., (1994). *Essays in understanding, 1930-1954*, pg. 8-9; Young-Bruehl, E. (1982). *Hannah Arendt, for love of the world*, pg. 36.

In a conference on *The Work of Hannah Arendt* organised in Toronto in November of 1972, she again makes her desire to understand quite clear, “Now I will admit one thing. I will admit that [I]am, of course, primarily interested in understanding. This is absolutely true...I cannot live without trying at least to understand whatever happens.”<sup>308</sup> Understanding, for her, was a means to ‘reconcile’ herself with the world in which she lived (ibid.) and the world that she loved, as has been seen previously. Things had to make sense for life to make sense and ‘to make sense’ meant that she had to understand.

By understanding she did not pretend to solve the problem or problems. Far from it. For her, to understand the world, was her way of engaging with the world, and therefore of being alive in it.<sup>309</sup> Understanding or engagement in this way is a solitary activity as all pursuit of truth is. Arendt, the individual, is the one that first needed to understand.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Arendt, H. (1972). “On Hannah Arendt,” pg. 303.

<sup>309</sup> Boella confirms that Arendt is a thinker of the present times or a thinker of experience in the sense that her efforts are centered on configuring (and making possible) as an element of experience, thought and action (Boella, L., (2010) *Pensar con el corazón Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Edith Stein, María Zambrano*, Edited by Narcea, pg. 28).

<sup>310</sup> From the interview that Arendt held with Günter Gaus on 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1964:

ARENDR: You know, that is not a simple question. If I am to speak very honestly I would have to say: When I am working, I am not interested in how my work might affect people.

GAUS: And when you are finished?

ARENDR: Then I am finished. What is important for me is to understand. For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding (...). Certain things get formulated. If I had a good enough memory to really retain everything that I think, I doubt very much that I would have written anything-I know my own laziness. What is important to me is the thought process itself. As long as I have succeeded in thinking something through, I am personally quite satisfied. If I then succeed in expressing my thought process adequately in writing, that satisfies me also.

Viewing the world as Arendt saw it gives us a glimpse of *who* Hannah Arendt really was (EU xi) precisely what this work is about. I would like to point out here that Augustine, whom she read fervently, too was very much for practise of truth with the heart as is evident from his *Confessions*<sup>311</sup>. One could therefore argue that Arendt learnt the importance of performance – as understood by Arendt and as explained in Chapter 2 of this work – from him. She herself said, “I do not believe that there is any thought process possible without personal experience.” (EU 20) It also serves as an example that demonstrates the importance she attached to the relationship between the contemplative and active life, by actively putting her own theories, so to speak, into practise.

This desire of hers is also understandable given the context of the world at that time. Her need to understand why the war had taken place, why someone would want to plan a genocide – and on a massive scale at that – how seemingly ordinary people could engage in such an enterprise and how it was possible to get people to walk to their deaths with practically no resistance were central questions for her. They are questions that would have been raised by any ordinary thinking being that loves the world and needs to be in solidarity or reconciled with the world in which they live and which they love.

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You ask about the effects of my work on others. If I may wax ironical, that is a masculine question. Men always want to be terribly influential, but I see that as somewhat external. Do I imagine myself being influential? No. I want to understand. And if others understand-in the same sense that I have understood-that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home. (EU 3)

<sup>311</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* X, 2. There he claims for example how his confession is made “silently and yet not silently” implying that something was done about it. This is very much in line with Arendt’s concept and importance of a *vita activa*. He also says, “But this Thy Word were little did it only command by speaking, and not go before in performing” (ibid.).

Arendt struggled to understand the political events of the twentieth century and these attempts resulted in her publications such as “Understanding and Politics” and “On the Nature of Totalitarianism.” A collection of 41 essays that she wrote in her effort to understand the world on different topics during the time frame of 1930-1954 have been collected in a 1994 publication entitled *Essays in Understanding* cited all throughout this work. Some of the essays include “Approaches to the ‘German Problem’”, “Organised Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” “What is Existential Philosophy?,” “Understanding Communism,” “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought,” etc. Writing helped her. She says, “For me, writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding. (...) Certain things get formulated.” (EU 3) In the same way, she says that when she wrote the book *Rahel Varhagen*, “I wrote it with the idea, ‘I want to understand.’” (EU 12)

In a 1930 article, she calls into question “the possibility of an *ontological* understanding of being” given that

“The ontological structure of human existence in the world, to the extent that they remain unquestionably constant (...) are the very things that are unimportant, that do not concern us. In any attempt we make to understand our own existence, we are thrown back upon the ever changing ontic realm, which represents *real* reality as opposed to the ‘theories’ of the philosophers.” (EU 32–22)

For Arendt, life is constantly changing due to natality. There is a constant beginning due to our actions that are ‘ongoing’. This is the ‘ever changing ontic realm’ and which to her is the ‘*real* reality’ – the reality that needs to be understood. The idea is not to start *another* political philosophy that can account for this, but a new understanding of politics as such. To some degree, this provides another possible

explanation for her breaking away from the traditional mode of thinking in philosophy at this stage of her philosophical career as compared to reasons provided earlier in chapter 1. Due to the circumstances, a new understanding was more helpful given that the older or traditional ones had seemingly been proven insufficient. As has been seen, Arendt is a great fan of questioning fundamental preconceptions regarding the course of the world and human behaviour. In the case of radical evil, the old traditional means, in her opinion were not applicable since the totalitarian phenomena was new to history with no existent means to explain it. She has referred to it as, “the total collapse of all established moral standards in public and private life during the nineteen-thirties and -forties, not only (...) in Hitler’s Germany but also in Stalin’s Russia.” (RJ 52) To her, “Everything we know of totalitarianism demonstrates a horrible originality which no farfetched historical parallels can alleviate.” (EU 309) To understand the phenomenon better, she insists on placing emphasis “on a historical and social context” (EU 34) which served to influence the whole incident as well as the human condition. They provide for better understanding. For example, she suggests that,

“To understand the meaning of totalitarian terror, we have to turn our attention to two noteworthy facts that would appear to be completely unrelated. The first of these is the extreme care that both Nazis and Bolsheviks take to isolate concentration camps from the outside world and to treat those who have disappeared into them as if they were already dead.” (EU 303)

These are all means that she used to try to explain the phenomenon of radical evil and how it was possible to end up doing what they did. The traditional means probably provided some explanations but new and different means had to be applied as well, given the circumstances of this near inexplicable occurrence. Old traditional philosophical means did not provide the necessary answers to her that could justify – so to

speak – what had happened. She had to break away from them because,

“they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment. In other words, the very event, the phenomenon, which we try – and must try – to understand has deprived us of our traditional tools of understanding.” (EU 310)

New tools and categories had to be found that would rightfully correspond as fitting punishment for the crime of radical evil, because the traditional ones were seemingly no longer applicable (EU 302, 315, 321). Benhabib, when commenting on this, does not deny that Arendt herself insisted that Eichmann ought to be condemned for his deeds. She also phrases Arendt’s question that still “remains unanswered” to be “on what principles and according to which justification?”<sup>312</sup> because nothing was applicable anymore. This was evidenced in the Nüremberg trials where the punishments that were rendered were ridiculous compared to the nature of crimes of which the accused were found guilty of having committed.

Nevertheless, understanding it was necessary for her. To be able to explain it, she needed to know how it was possible for humanity to have reacted in such a manner. That is why it is easily arguable that, her point was not to find fault with anyone nor to declare who were the really guilty ones. The point for her was to be able to come to terms with what had happened by reconciling herself to this world as mentioned previously. She was able to do this by covering the Eichmann trial. That is why she says in a letter to Mary McCarthy, her long-term friend, dated October 1963, “You were the only reader to understand what otherwise I

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<sup>312</sup> Benhabib, S. (1990) “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative.” In Hinchmann, L., & Hinchmann, S. K. (Ed.). *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (pp. 111-142). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, pg. 123.

have never admitted – namely that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria<sup>313</sup>. And that ever since I did it, I feel – after twenty years [since the war] – light-hearted, about the whole matter.”<sup>314</sup> In other words, Arendt had in some way come to terms with the issue. It was necessary for her and our own survival, for “to understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all.” (EU 307) For Arendt, “The result of understanding is meaning, which we originate in the very process of living insofar as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer.” (EU 309)

Another important aspect that she brings up when it comes to understanding is that a thing can only be properly understood once it has properly been defeated or is at least no longer ongoing. This would imply better understanding was more likely after the war was over. That is why, in reference to understanding radical evil she says, “we do not, and cannot expect to understand it definitively as long as it has not definitively been defeated.” (EU 309) One could argue here that that this is so because of the concept of natality, for as long as man is an acting man, he is constantly beginning something new. This in turn implies ongoing change. So, for as long as there is ongoing change, there can be no full understanding. This is because men are agents of change and it is men who are the acting beings in either political or historical matters. Therefore, in order to understand them, one has to understand the men involved, and the men will only be fully understood when they have stopped acting.

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<sup>313</sup> This may explain the tone of voice she used in her book.

<sup>314</sup> Arendt, H. & McCarthy. *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949 – 1975*, Brighman, C. (Ed.) New York: Harcourt Brace, pg. 168.

“The understanding of political and historical matters, since they are so profoundly and fundamentally human, has something in common with the understanding of people: who somebody essentially *is*, we know only after he is dead.” (EU 309)

What is not clear here is if she therefore supposes that it will never be understood until all humanity is gone or dead. What *is* clear is the connection or link that there is between men, and political and historical matters. Men are the primary agents and the sufferers of the consequences of their actions. Therefore, to understand them, is to understand men. Earlier on, she had said that it is actually not possible to know *who* man is because one has to be more than human to understand that which is human otherwise we would be “jumping over our own shadows” (HC 10–11). That is why she will say that to understand is also self-understanding.

“understanding is clearly, and perhaps primarily, also a process of self-understanding. For, although we merely know, we do not as yet understand, what we are fighting against, we know and understand even less what we are fighting for.” (EU 310)

How then for Arendt can one understand? First, as quoted above, there has to be self-understanding for there to be an understanding of radicle evil. But we cannot as yet fully understand it because we are still

fighting against it.<sup>315</sup> Nevertheless, the understanding process has been started. This is to our advantage because with just a preliminary sort of understanding of radical evil, is sufficiently useful in preventing it (EU 311). It will do well to note here that Arendt distinguishes between knowledge about totalitarianism and understanding of it much as she says that they are interrelated (EU 310). What is of relevant interest here is the interrelatedness between understanding and knowledge in relation to evil categorised as radical evil.

“Understanding precedes and succeeds knowledge. Preliminary understanding, which is at the basis of all knowledge, and true understanding, which transcends it, have this in common: They make knowledge meaningful.” (EU 311)

True understanding transcends knowledge and makes it meaningful. This is important because it means that in order to understand, knowledge is necessary. It is necessary therefore that true understanding be based on true knowledge, which she herself has always defended in the same way that she has defended that the need to understand should be common.

The effort to understand radical evil, something that has “ruined our categories of thought and our standards of judgment” (EU 321) is no easy task and can even prove to be frightening. Many times, this was the reason why some people were unable to face it. Some people were just

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<sup>315</sup> “For it seems quite doubtful that this kind of comprehensive knowledge, which is not yet understanding and does not deal with the essence of totalitarianism, can be produced by organized research. The chances are great that the relevant data will get buried in an avalanche of statistics or observations on the one hand and evaluation on the other, neither of which tells us anything about historical conditions and political aspirations. Only the sources themselves talk-documents, speeches, reports, and the like-and this material is readily accessible and need not be organized and institutionalized.” (EU 310 fn. 5)

not able to deal with it.<sup>316</sup> Arendt herself, laments the loss of quest for understanding (EU 321, 339). Those who do persevere in their quest for answers are shocked by the breakdown of our categories of thought and mode of judgement.

“For those engaged in the quest for meaning and understanding, what is frightening in the rise of totalitarianism is not that it is something new, but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgment.” (EU 318)

The system that pretended to alter the nature of man in actual fact destroyed him. Basic natural phenomena such as his standards of judgement as well as our categories of thought were turned upside down. These were completely ruined. Men no longer recognised the good as good nor the bad as bad.

In order to face such grandiose evil, she advised a stepping back, as do the spectators, from the scene as opposed to a drowning in an ocean of facts and figures and details of what happened. In fact she says, “This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding” (EU 323). This is very much in line with the spectator who she claimed is better able to understand something precisely because he is not in it. He observes it from a distance and thus has a better view. Without such distancing, she says, “we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have.” (EU 323)

Once Arendt had understood, she would set down to writing as was seen earlier (EU 3). She will only write once she has thought it out. She says,

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<sup>316</sup> This was discussed in greater depth in a previous chapter about people fleeing to art or literature. Refer to section 3.1.

“I can tell you that I never write until I can, so to speak, take dictation from myself... I know exactly what I want to write. I do not write until I do.” (EU 3) Meaning that she writes what she has understood. Her expression of this on paper is as she thinks fit and as stated earlier, with little or no regard for what the effect might have on people. She has had to pay the price because not everyone has taken dearly to what she has written and or how she wrote.

As a philosopher, saying the truth regardless has been a price that Hannah Arendt has had to pay given all the controversy that she has had to suffer especially during her years just after her report on the Eichmann trial. The first thing that she did as described previously is search for the truth. In fact, for her,

“Insofar as the philosopher is nothing but a philosopher, his quest ends with the contemplation of the highest truth, which, since it illuminates everything else, is also the highest beauty; but insofar as the philosopher is a man among men, a mortal among mortals, and a citizen among citizens, he must take his truth and transform it into a set of rules, by virtue of which transformation he then may claim to become an actual ruler – the king – philosopher.” (BPF 114)

This shows that she knew what she was looking for and that she would not have relented searching for it until had been understood and/or found. On several occasions, in her writings, she referred to Socrates death showing that she was not naïve to the fact that at times there is a price to be paid for adhering to it. When she makes reference to his historic death in a 1967 article, she writes his that proposition; “It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong” is actually ‘not an opinion’ and that “its impact upon practical conduct as an ethical precept is undeniable” (BPF 247). In other words, she valued truth as well as his

valour in not escaping truth at the cost of the death sentence. Should we then expect less of her? The misconceptions and false accusations never stopped her as was seen earlier<sup>317</sup>.

#### 4.1.2 The Strength of Factual Truth

After the controversy caused by the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem The Banality of evil*, Hannah Arendt wrote an essay entitled *Truth and Politics* with the aim of clarifying two different but interrelated issues of which, she claims,

“I had not been aware before and whose importance seemed to transcend the occasion. The first concerns the questions of whether it is always legitimate to tell the truth – did I believe without qualification in ‘*Fiat veritas, et pereat mundus*’<sup>318</sup>? The second arose through the amazing amount of lies used in the “controversy” – lies about what I had written, on one hand, and about the facts I had reported, on the other. The following reflections try to come to grips with both issues.” (BPF 227)

One may think that the thing to do once one has understood is to act on the understood truth. For Arendt, the ensuing effect after having identified the problem of why people reacted as they did to her work, was her attempt at reconciliation with the world, which meant trying to understand these reactions. As can be seen above, she first identified two problems that seemingly arose from her report and set to understanding them in order to be able to ‘come to grips with both issues’. The first of these is whether it is always legitimate to tell the

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<sup>317</sup> Refer to subsection 3.3.1.

<sup>318</sup> Latin phrase that translates to ‘Let justice be done though the world may perish.’

truth and the second identified issue was the ‘amazing amount of lies used’ – lies about what she had written and about facts she had reported.

In order to address the first problem which concerned the legitimacy of always telling the truth, she asks some tough questions;

“Is it of the very essence of truth to be impotent and of the very essence of power to be deceitful? And what kind of reality does truth possess if it is powerless in the public realm, which more than any other sphere of human life guarantees reality of existence to natal and mortal men (...)? Finally, is not impotent truth just as despicable as power that gives no heed to truth?” (BPF 228)

In other words, what is the point of truth and why wouldn’t one tell the truth having identified it? The first thing she does is to differentiate between the kinds of truth. She assigns all “mathematical, scientific and philosophical truths to the common species of rational truth as distinguished from factual truth.” (BPF 231) Her primary concern is factual truth given that for her this is much more vulnerable<sup>319</sup> than all other kinds of rational truth taken together (ibid.) and because it is “facts and events—the invariable outcome of men living and acting together—(that) constitute the very texture of the political realm” (BPF 231). She also argues that the reason for looking into this is political and not philosophical thus justifying why we can “afford to disregard the question of what truth is” (ibid.).

Facts and events are ‘infinitely more fragile’ she comments because “they occur in the field of the ever-changing affairs of men, in whose flux there is nothing more permanent than the admittedly relative

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<sup>319</sup> More about the vulnerability of truth will be discussed shortly.

permanence of the human mind's structure." (BPF 231) It is also facts and events that she reported about, over which people seemed to have an issue. For as long as there are men free to act, then there will necessarily be a field that is 'ever-changing.' The facts remained but in many ways, the people had changed. In like manner, there will be change in as long as men act freely. This is the field in which facts and events occur and what, for Arendt, explains their fragility.

Still in relation to truth, she gives a historical explanation of how the conflict between truth and politics originated. A brief analysis of this will shade more light on the first problem that she identified above. According to her, it arose out of two opposed ways of life; "the life of the philosopher, as interpreted first by Parmenides and then by Plato, and; the way of life of the citizen" (BPF 231-232). Each had their own way of life, with citizens opinions about human affairs continually changing (ibid.). To Arendt, the conflict started when;

"To the citizens' ever-changing opinions about human affairs, which themselves were in a state of constant flux, the philosopher opposed the truth about those things which in their very nature were everlasting and from which, therefore, principles could be derived to stabilize human affairs. Hence the opposite to truth was mere opinion, which was equated with illusion, and it was this degrading of opinion that gave the conflict its political poignancy; for opinion, and not truth, belongs among the indispensable prerequisites of all power." (BPF 233)

To begin with, philosophers opposed the truth that ideally should not be opposed given that they were everlasting in their very nature. Second, this was done with attempts to derive principles that would stabilize human affairs which are variable by their very nature. Arendt mentions

how the antagonism between truth and opinion is further elaborated by Plato especially in the *Gorgias* (BPF 233). This shows just how old and yet nevertheless, how current this issue is even in today's political arena. The result of change of truth, was that the opposite of truth, everlasting in nature, became mere opinion, which in turn was equated to illusion. How this links the conflict to politics seems to be with the degradation of opinion as cited above.

Another argument that Arendt gives in relation to this is the fact that opinions are of great political significance<sup>320</sup>. All governments rely on the support of like-minded people in order to gain and maintain power. As quoted above, it is opinions and not truth that belong among the indispensable prerequisites of all power (BPF 233). Absolute truth, on the other hand, needs no support from the side of opinion (ibid.). Interestingly, she is of the view that "every claim in the sphere of human affairs to an absolute truth ... strikes at the very roots of all politics and all governments." (BPF 233) This would mean that if a philosopher made any such claim, contrary to absolute truth, then his lie would strike at the very roots of politics.

For a fuller impact of what this means, it will do well to note the stand of factual truth in modern day politics. When Arendt wrote her report, it was by stating several factual truths and it was these that people found so hard to accept. Her complaint is that people were not tolerant of her factual report and yet have been very tolerant of other diverse opinions.

To begin with, she notes that "no former time tolerated so many diverse opinions on religion or philosophical matters" (BPF 236). Arendt then goes on to say that if in any case factual truth happens to go against "a

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<sup>320</sup> Here she quotes James Madison, "All governments rest on opinion" (BPF 233)

given group's profit or pleasure"<sup>321</sup>, today it is greeted "with greater hostility than ever before" (BPF 236). Therefore, much as diversity of opinion is tolerated, opposing factual truth is not<sup>322</sup>.

At this point she asks, "But do facts, independent of opinion and interpretation, exist at all?" (BPF 238) Her response to this is in the affirmative saying that "there is no argument against the existence of factual matter" (ibid.) and "no excuse for the historian to manipulate facts as he pleases" (ibid.) nor for any generation to rearrange them with its own perspective much as they have a right to write their own history (BPF 238–239). Factual matter therefore is untouchable giving it a power of its own. Factual matter in this work, refers to the factual issue that Arendt reported in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Given that they too are facts, they are unchangeable and ought to be taken as they are. The 'problem' is that she did not shy away from reporting these

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<sup>321</sup> One may ask what happens if these happen to be state truths? She acknowledges that the state itself has state secrets that ought not to be revealed and at times the state may wish to withhold certain information from the public. Of interest, rather, are publicly known facts which the same public knows, she says, and "can successfully and often spontaneously, taboo their public discussion and treat them as though they were what they are not—namely, secrets." (BPF 236) She is quick to clarify that this is not her concern here.

<sup>322</sup> She laments this further in the following text; "What seems even more disturbing is that to the extent to which unwelcome factual truths are tolerated in free countries they are often, consciously or unconsciously, transformed into opinions – as though the fact of Germany's support of Hitler or of France's collapse before the German armies ... during the Second World War were not a matter of historical record but a matter of opinion. Since such factual truths concern issues of immediate political relevance, there is more at stake here than the perhaps inevitable tension between two ways of life within the framework of a common and commonly recognized reality. What is at stake here is this common and factual reality itself, and this is indeed a political problem of the first order." (BPF 236)

factual truths as she saw them, and this could have been the cause of the controversy. In her *Denktagebuch* one reads,

“Truth however, because it can only be found and told by the individual, has no power; by itself it is unable to organise. Only when many consent to one truth, does truth acquire power. However, power lies in the fact of many consenting, not in the truth as such.”<sup>323</sup>

In other words, when many consent to one truth, it is more powerful, much as it already has power on its own. This was lacking in her case which is no surprise given that she was one of few who covered the case. What also comes up in the citation above, is the idea that acceptance of truth is a private or individual matter. Truth has to be accepted by the individual. It cannot be changed and it exists independent of opinion. If many hold one opinion, it also acquires power, sometimes over truth. But she clarifies that “All truths—not only the various kinds of rational truth but also factual truth—are opposed to opinion in their *mode of asserting validity*.” (BPF 239) This is where the two differ.

Truth, she explains, “carries within itself an element of coercion” (BPF 239) and it practically compels one to accept it for what it is. The way she puts it is that a pronounced truth is “beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent” (BPF 240). Truths, therefore practically have no need to ‘assert themselves’. This characteristic of truth is such that it is hated by tyrants in politics, who rightly fear the competition of a coercive force that they i) ‘cannot monopolize’, and ii) ‘enjoys a rather

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<sup>323</sup> My translation from the original German text: “Wahrheit aber, weil sie immer nur vom Einzelnen gefunden und gesagt werden kann, hat keine Macht; sie selbst ist unfähig zu organisieren. Erst wenn Viele sich auf eine Wahrheit einigen, wird sie zur Macht. Aber was dann Macht verleiht, ist das Sich-darauf-Einigen, nicht die Wahrheit als solche.” (*Denktagebuch*, Heft XXIV, [21] pg. 627)

precarious status in the eyes of governments' (BPF 243). This is characteristic of all truths even outside of government. Perhaps one could argue that her report had this coercive element which was found to be repulsive by those who read her report.

Opinions, on the other hand, are void of the coercive quality that truth possesses and their validity cannot be imposed in a like manner. Therefore, if an opinion is not welcome, different means need to be applied for them to be accepted. What Arendt proposed in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, were not opinions and so arguments were not valid because they were not applicable. She explains that, "Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies." (BPF 241) Here we have an explanation for the differentiation between the mode of asserting validity of truth and of opinion. Since truth has this coercive nature, assertion of validity of it is a given, while with opinions, one may argue and thereby try or hope to assert validity. This is what her adversaries, especially those who felt strongly against what she had written, should have had recourse to.

The "forceful" element of truth has been characterised to be despotic from a purely political perspective (BPF 243). Despotism is not at all political and is disliked because, as quoted, the true essence of politics consists in debate. Facts are not debatable and neither is the occurrence of past events. Arendt herself says that "truth preludes debate" (BPF 241) and yet "debate constitutes the very essence of political life." (BPF 241). Elsewhere, she says, "Public debate can only deal with things which – if we want to put it negatively – we cannot figure out with certainty. Otherwise, if we can figure it out with certainty, why do we all need to get together?"<sup>324</sup> Basically, if something is not debatable then

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<sup>324</sup> Arendt, H. (1972) "On Hannah Arendt," pg. 317.

why talk about it in public since the mere statement of facts is not politics? For a politician, it is worse still if the facts work against them because he has no power to change them or to wish them away. Opinions are also of no use in this case as these add nothing to the already established fact and this is precisely why politicians find facts so infuriating.

For a better understanding of their infuriation and that of those who were against what she had written, it is well to remember that speech in the *polis* is of utmost importance<sup>325</sup>. Men in politics must speak out. That is why the *polis* is there<sup>326</sup> (HC 33). It is where other peoples' opinions are taken into account and where they can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon. This is why opinions are of such political importance. They can change society and influence society. According to Arendt, this is how an opinion should be formed, and if she had wanted to present her opinions in this book, it is the way she would have employed.

“I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them (...). The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will

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<sup>325</sup> As quoted previously; “Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the *bios politikos*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*).” (HC 25)

<sup>326</sup> To be political, is to live in a polis and it meant that decisions were made through words and persuasion and never through violence or force. (HC 25) It was seen in Chapter 1 how Arendt's descriptions of man as a political being are based on Greek politics (HC 58–59, 192–198). In order to classify the political arena, there was a clear distinction between the public sphere and the private sphere.

be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.” (BPF 241)

Here Arendt displays a great capacity for objective thinking and the factor of plurality shows the importance she confers on the individual who is absent but whose standpoint is nevertheless, of importance. If anything, from the above interpretation, the standpoint of the absent individual is as important as the standpoint of the ‘representative’ considering the issue at hand. The more people’s standpoints, she says, the more valid my opinion.

It is also relevant that Arendt notes that when opinions are formed, much as they ought to rely on several people’s standpoint, “No opinion is self-evident” (BPF 242). In other words, truth is necessary to form an opinion. She explains that an opinion “ascends from these particularities to some impartial generality” (BPF 242) meaning that they ascend from truth or fact to opinion. She also says that “Rational truth enlightens human understanding, and factual truth must inform opinions” (ibid.). The problem with this is that truths have an element of contingency that is ‘literally unlimited’. Therefore, truth has this vulnerability<sup>327</sup> (BPF 231).

She is of the mind that the problem that this causes is to such an extent that first, “pre-modern philosophy refused to take seriously the realm of human affairs” (BPF 242) and second, “modern philosophers have

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<sup>327</sup> Further still, truths are ‘infinitely more fragile’ than opinions (BPF 231) ‘they occur in the field of ever-changing affairs of men, in whose flux there is nothing more permanent than the admittedly relative permanence of the human mind’s structure.’ Once they are lost, no rational effort will ever bring them back (BPF 231).

conjured up all kinds of necessity”<sup>328</sup> (ibid.). This does not mean that she denies the fact of contingency, however, to her, the two points above are not justified.

Her argument is that much as ‘it might have been otherwise’, this is more so “in historical perspective” (BPF 243), and it is the price of freedom. She also argues that it (the world) is the ‘only realm where men are truly free’ (BPF 243). For “nothing could ever happen if reality did not kill, by definition, all the other potentialities originally inherent in any given situation” (BPF 243). In other words, she defends freedom and holds that contingency is not against fact and truth. She also concludes that “factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion, and this may be among the reasons that opinion-holders find it relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion.” (Ibid.) In the same way, her work was freely written much as it met with rejection and contradiction.

This raises the question of what would happen in the event of two conflicting opinions. She explains that since factual truth is established by the evidence of witnesses (unreliable), records, documents and monuments – many of which she used and made reference to – (admittedly also unreliable since they could be forgeries), in the event of dispute “only other witnesses but no third and higher instance can be invoked, and settlement is usually arrived at by way of the majority” (BPF 243). She finds this procedure to be unreliable for obvious reasons and takes us back to the case of Socrates who failed to convince his adversary Thrasymachus that ‘justice is better than injustice’ and is told that his proof is far from convincing.

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<sup>328</sup> The necessities she refers to here are “from the dialectical necessity of a world spirit or of material conditions to the necessities of an allegedly unchangeable and known human nature.” (BPF 243)

Socrates praises his adversary's eloquence and Arendt confirms from this that they were already convinced before the argument started and so nothing could have been said to convince them otherwise (BPF 244–245). She also explains that Socrates' argument is valid “to the philosopher – or rather to man insofar as he is a thinking being” (BPF 245) but not to man insofar as he is a citizen for whom the world and public welfare should have precedence over his own wellbeing (ibid.). She agrees with Socrates that for the philosopher as a thinking being, it is better to be at odds with the world but not in contradiction with oneself. Whereas the citizens should be more concerned with the world instead of his own wellbeing even at the cost of contradiction in the silent dialogue carried out between me and myself i.e. thought. Having highlighted this, she states that, “Since philosophical truth concerns man in his singularity, it is unpolitical by nature.” (BPF 246) This is because, as seen in the first chapter of this work, for it to be political, the human condition of plurality is necessary. Philosophical truth however, concerns the individual in his singularity, thereby classifying it as ‘unpolitical’.

She goes on to explain that a philosopher who “wishes his truth to prevail over the opinions of the multitude, (...) will suffer defeat” (BPF 246). This is because, much as his truth may prevail “not to its own compelling quality but to the agreement of the many” (Ibid.), this very multitude “might change their minds tomorrow and agree on something else” (ibid.). She claims this makes it a “Pyrrhic victory” because “what had been philosophical truth would have become mere opinion” (BPF 246). This could be the principle reason as to why she made no real effort to make her stand prevail with regard to her book and to defend her use of the phrase *banality of evil*. Those who would have believed her because many others had done so, could easily have changed their

minds had another different explanation been forthcoming that was supported by many as well.

Her argument is that when truths are mistaken to be opinion, then this would mean that truths need agreement and consent and that for a truth to be “politically relevant, is a matter of opinion and not of ‘the truth’ (ibid.). She describes how some philosophers are tempted to have their truths prevail as opinions over the people and how at times this may be the case. Nevertheless, she points out that when truths and opinions coincide such as with some philosophical or religious statements, they are never of any “political or practical consequences” because the binding factor in most cases transcends and remains “outside the realm in which human intercourse takes place” (BPF 246–247). For such ‘truths’, she says, “Their validity depends upon free agreement and consent; they are arrived at by discursive, representative thinking; and they are communicated by means of persuasion and dissuasion.” (BPF 247)

This is contrary to what it should be as was seen at the beginning of this section where it was shown that truths are of a coercive nature. Mode of asserting validity of truth is not through persuasion and dissuasion. This is for opinions and for cases where philosophical truths become opinions as described above.

Going back to the example of Socrates, she says that despite the fact that his philosophical truth was not very persuasive, it obtained a “high degree of validity” when he “staked his life on this truth – to set an example” and by “refusing to escape the death sentence” (BPF 247). She says that,

“this teaching by example is, indeed, the only form of ‘persuasion’ that philosophical truth is capable of without

perversion or distortion; by the same token, philosophical truth can become ‘practical’ and inspire action without violating the rules of the political realm only when it manages to become manifest in the guise of an example. This is *the only chance for an ethical principle to be verified as well as validated.*” (BPF 247–248) (emphasis added)

Here we have the power of example and a means by which she implies that a philosophical truth may be politically validated. This, she says, is the only way open to the philosopher to act (BPF 248). When asked, in her interview with Gaus, if there are “reasons to be silent about something you know?” (EU 18), she asks,

“*fiat veritas, et pereat mundus* [let truth be told though the world may perish]? But the Eichmann book did not *de facto* touch upon such things. The book really does not jeopardize anybody’s legitimate interests. It was only thought to do so.” (EU 18)

She also clarifies that it is only moral philosophy that is capable of transforming a theoretical or speculative statement into exemplary truth (BPF 248). This is because, she says, other truths or factual statements “contain no principles upon which men might act and which thus could become manifest in the world; their very content defies this kind of verification.” (BPF 249; EU 19) Thereby implying that such principles are only in moral philosophy. If anyone were ready to die for a factual truth, he would merely display “courage” or perhaps “stubbornness” (ibid.). To die for a factual truth does not make it any less true nor any truer than they already are. If this then is how a philosopher may act in politics, how about a truth-teller who is not a philosopher—the citizen who adheres to truth? Arendt here explains that if she had anticipated the

Eichmann controversy, she would have “confronted the alternative: to write or not to write.” (EU 19)

All in all, she believes in the persevering strength of truth as she notes in her *Denktagebuch*<sup>329</sup>, where she compares “the strength of truth” against “the power of the lie.” There she admits that the power of the lie may be stronger than truth, but it doesn’t last long<sup>330</sup>. One may conclude that Arendt faced this controversy by sticking to her facts and truths as reported and defending her standpoint with regard to the facts that led her to use the phrase *banality of evil* which she held to be true. For Arendt, therefore, truth is worth fighting for. She once quoted Friedrich Heer in her 1964 article entitled: “The Deputy: Guilt by Silence?” saying, “Only the truth will make us free. The whole truth, which is always awful.”<sup>331</sup>

#### 4.1.3 Truth-tellers acting in politics

The main thing that Arendt advises when looking at politics from the perspective of truth, is the utmost important factor of taking one’s stand from outside the political realm. Given that, “The story of the conflict between truth and politics is an old and complicated one” (BPF 229) going as far back as Plato and Herodotus to evidence this conflict, the former of who she says was the first to consciously undertake to “λέγειν τὰ ἔοντα, to say what is” (BPF 229) despite the risks that this involved. Generally, risks arise when attempts are made by a truth-teller to try to

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<sup>329</sup> Refer to Heft XXIV [35], pg. 631.

<sup>330</sup> The original German text reads, “Die Kraft der Wahrheit gegen die Macht der Lüge: Die Macht ist zwar mächtiger, aber sie ist nicht dauerhaft.” (*Denktagebuch*, Heft XXIV [34], pg. 631)

<sup>331</sup> Arendt, H. “Storm Over ‘The Deputy.’” In Bernauer S.J.J.W. (Eds.) *Amor Mundi*. Boston College Studies in Philosophy, Vol. 26. Springer: Dordrecht, pg. 54.

take their fellow citizens out of ‘falsehood and illusion’ because then his life is put in danger (BPF 229). In other words when he tries to meddle in politics because as seen, that is not his place. When Arendt defended what she had written as well as her point of view as stated in her written works, this is precisely what she did. She came in to report on the Eichmann case as a reporter for *The New Yorker*. Not as a philosopher, not as a Jew and, not as a politician.

“That standpoint is the standpoint of the truth-teller, who forfeits his position—and, with it, the validity of what he has to say—if he tries to interfere directly in human affairs and to speak the language of persuasion or of violence.” (BPF 243)

Basically, a truth-teller should stay out of politics and take his stand from outside the political realm if he hopes to convince anyone or to be effective<sup>332</sup>. As soon as he interferes directly in human affairs, he forfeits his position as outsider and with it, his effectiveness. She further advises that the outsider should inherently be impartial with no political commitment and with no adherence to a cause (BPF 243) for credibility and authenticity. Neutrality is therefore key. Otherwise, guarding of truth cannot be guaranteed and neither can authenticity.

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<sup>332</sup> Byarugaba argues that this is of primary importance in Institutions of higher learning, being outside of the political realm, to seriously reconsider their role to protect truth against social and political power in order for there to be true and genuine development. In today’s Academe’s sphere research and innovation are of primary interest. For these to result in relevant, fruitful and meaningful development, existing truths must be safeguarded as suggested above.” (Byarugaba, J.K. (2017). “The Compelling force of Truth in Politics and its impact on Education by Hannah Arendt.” In González, J.E. (Ed.) *Aportaciones de vanguardia en la investigación actual*. Ediciones Universitarias, TECNOS)

It is commendable how Arendt herself takes her stand from outside of the political realm in order to look upon politics from the perspective of truth, which is apolitical and therefore outside of the political realm (BPF 259). In this way, she assumes a neutral position so as not to compromise credibility. Her example is an indication of her impartiality in actual political matters and serves to show how effective she holds this impartiality to be. For her, impartiality differs from “qualified, representative opinion” (BPF, pg. 260). By this is implied that a truth-teller cannot be a politician otherwise he compromises his own truthfulness, etc. Having understood this, one is able to see the “non-political and, potentially, even anti-political nature of truth” (CR 3-47; HC 242)<sup>333</sup>.

By promoting this stand, outside of the political sphere, Arendt admits that one may misinterpret her view of the political realm and of politics. She explains that,

“The reason for this deformation is that factual truth clashes with the political only on this lowest level of human affairs, just as Plato’s philosophical truth clashed with the political on the considerably higher level of opinion and agreement. From this perspective, we remain unaware of the actual content of political life – of the joy and the gratification that arise out of being in company with our peers, out of acting together and appearing in public, out of inserting ourselves into the world by word and deed, thus acquiring and sustaining our personal

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<sup>333</sup> She writes in *The Human Condition*, “Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.” (HC 242) It is ‘apolitical’ and ‘antipolitical’ because it “destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others.” (HC 242)

identity and beginning something entirely new. However, what I meant to show here is that this whole sphere, its greatness notwithstanding, is limited – that it does not encompass the whole of man's and the world's existence. It is limited by those things which men cannot change at will. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises.” (BPF 263)

In the above explanation, one becomes aware of her humility as a philosopher who is able to acknowledge that man is a limited being and that the political sphere also has its limits by acknowledging that the political sphere does not encompass ‘the whole of man's and the world's existence’. That there are things which men cannot change.

For Arendt, “The only way to guarantee truthfulness is by impartiality, integrity and independence from both social and political powers.” (BPF 243). This is because a truth-teller who meddles in political affairs is ‘more likely to arouse justified suspicion’ (ibid,) even if his truth coincides with public interests. My position is that, “This means that the guardians of truth must not in any way be involved with social and/or political powers. They have got to be independent of them and maintain

the necessary impartiality”<sup>334</sup>. In other words, truth-tellers can do nothing effectively from *inside* the political realm.

According to Arendt, “the teller of factual truth is also a storyteller”<sup>335</sup> and that he brings about Hegel’s “reconciliation with reality” (BPF 262). This reconciliation is the whole point of understanding. Berkowitz explains that for Arendt, to reconcile with a wrong is to affirm one’s solidarity with the world as it is and is, therefore, to help bring into being a common world.<sup>336</sup> This is why reconciliation is important to her.

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<sup>334</sup> Refer to Byarugaba, J.K., (2017) *Reflexivity between the Modern Society Concepts of Equality and Plurality: Their Transformation according to Arendt*, pg. 98. In this article, Byarugaba explains how Arendt brings up the importance of the judiciary as well as higher institutions of learning where “truth and truthfulness have always constituted the highest criterion of speech and endeavour” (BPF 261) whose functions are performed from outside the political realm. They are guarders of truth and truths emerge from them. This is an important politically relevant function much as unwelcome judgements have been made by the judiciary and unwelcome truths have emerged from universities. They continue to be exposed to all the dangers arising from social pressure and political power but Arendt holds that chances for truth to prevail in public are greatly improved by their mere existence provided they continue to exist as independent institutions with supposedly disinterested scholars associated with them (BPF 261).

<sup>335</sup> A storyteller therefore, does not tell lies. Facts and truth can only be ‘made true’ by plain lies (BPF 241) or “through radical destruction” (CR 13). One of the means of ‘radical destruction’ (though not replacement) of truth is by persuasion and violence (BPF 243). Arendt goes on to say that in the political domain “such destruction would have to be wholesale” (ibid.). Lies are passed on as valid or as self-evident truths. To convince the masses of a false truth, one can easily round up scores of false witnesses to give evidence. On an even larger scale, people have resorted to mass manipulation of facts as made evident in the cases where there has been rewriting of history, holding of referendums to change constitutions and actual government policy for own benefit, as well as false image making with the help of the mass media.

<sup>336</sup> Berkowitz, R. & Storey, I. (Eds.) (2017) *Artifacts of Thinking: Reading Hannah Arendt’s *Denktagebuch**. New York: Fordham University Press.

Because of reconciliation, forgiveness is possible<sup>337</sup>, these in turn are only possible once one has understood why or how they came about. A way had to be found to reconcile the thoughtless “normality” of Eichmann with his monstrous deeds.

Her effort to do this led to her understanding of it in such a way that she was able to reconcile herself with the negative reactions received. In a postscript to a later edition of the afore mentioned book she concludes by saying, “The present report deals with nothing but the extent to which the court in Jerusalem succeeded in fulfilling the demands of justice” (EU 298). Thereby implying that this was no personal article but a report of how things were according to her perspective. A report implies truth, facts and events and these are not changeable much as one may accept or deny them. Her effort to report the trial and thereby reconcile the man and the event, is captured in her phrase, *banality of evil*. The other thing that can be seen from all this is the axial point that truth takes in Arendt’s<sup>338</sup> political thought as well as her respect for it.

## 4.2 Thoughtlessness of Eichmann

How Arendt ended up by reconciling Eichmann’s thoughtlessness with radical evil was no easy process as has been described throughout this work. However, it is now necessary to see how she came to put the two together. Arendt posed several questions such as, “Is wickedness, however we may define it, (...), *not* a necessary condition for evil-doing? Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought?” (RJ 160). Or put more simply,

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<sup>337</sup> *Denktagebuch*, Heft I, [1] pg.6.

<sup>338</sup> She is against getting rid of truth even at the cost of survival of the world and claims that a world utterly deprived of justice is not worth living in. (BPF 229)

“What are we ‘doing’ when we think?”<sup>339</sup>. I would add a further question, “Is radical evil solely the result of non-thinking?” or “Does non-thinking sufficiently explain ones’ collaboration with evil?” Would this not imply a sort of intellectualism as was the case with Socrates? Arendt observes,

“The question that imposed itself was, could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such nature that it ‘conditions’ men against evildoing?” (RJ 160)

Such questions are not easily answered especially if one is against employing metaphysical or traditional means, as Arendt was. After all, as has been seen, she was of the view that the traditional means could no longer provide necessary answers since nothing of the likes had happened before and the old means were just not applicable to the new evils.

On a different level, thinking and reflection are both mental activities that are necessary to tell good from bad. Arendt follows the Kantian

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<sup>339</sup> Young-Bruehl explains that “This question framed her [Arendt’s] exploration of the problem posed by Eichmann’s thoughtlessness—a problem she approached in Kantian terms: what is the *necessary condition* for evildoing? If thoughtlessness is the necessary condition for evildoing, is it possible that what we are ‘doing’ when we think is what prevents us from evildoing?” (Young-Bruehl, E. (1982). “Reflections on Hannah Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*.” In Hinchmann, L., & Hinchmann, S. K. (Ed.). *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (pgs. 335-364). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, pg. 337). She goes on to say that Arendt only tentatively stated this possibility, claiming that as “Arendt’s reflections unfolded, she (Arendt) suggested that it is not thinking per se that makes men abstain from evildoing: thinking neither gives rise to, prevents nor determines actions.” (ibid.)

distinction between *Vernunft* (reason) and *Verstand* (intellect and not understanding) (LMT 13). She points out that this distinction coincides with a distinction between two different mental activities, thinking and knowing (LMT 14-15). The first category concerns meaning while the second one concerns cognition (ibid.). This separation of knowledge from thinking was useful because she was able to assume that “thinking and reason are not concerned with what the intellect is concerned with” or put differently, “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.” (LMT 15). In other words, thinking and reason are not concerned with what the intellect is concerned with (ibid.). The question now is; What are thinking and reason concerned with? And more specifically in relation to morality? To answer these questions, it will be best to go back to antiquity in true Arendtian style.

#### 4.2.1 Socrates revisited

When Arendt analyses what Socrates<sup>340</sup> has to say about thinking, she points out that for him, “thinking is an activity that accompanies living” (LMT 178) She explains how to Socrates, thinking itself “will never make men wise or give them the answers to thought’s own questions.” (ibid.) Nevertheless, it is through thinking, the performance of the act<sup>341</sup>, that men are able to get answers and find meaning to life’s questions. That is why she says that for men, “To think and to be fully alive are the same, and this implies that thinking must always begin afresh.” (ibid.)

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<sup>340</sup> Young-Bruehl states that “Socrates was a model of a thinker for Arendt.” (Young-Bruehl, E. (1982). “Reflections on Hannah Arendt’s *The Life of the Mind*,” pg. 337). This comes out in several of her writings as will be made clear by all the references she made to him as an authority.

<sup>341</sup> Refer to subsection 2.4.1 of this work for more on performance.

Thinking is an activity that accompanies living<sup>342</sup> (ibid.), meaning that all living beings ought to think.

However, when Arendt got to face Eichmann she was struck by his shallowness and thoughtlessness. One can well understand her wanting to understand how this was possible in a man given that she herself was a thinking being and an avid thinker at that. Thinking was something necessary to her in order to live as pointed out (ibid.). This is why, one could say, Eichmann's thoughtlessness affected her so much. Arendt ended up writing about the importance of this in her final book, *Life of the Mind*, after she had had ample time to reflect on the impact that her report on *Eichmann in Jerusalem* had made on her readers. She had also had time to reflect on the nature of evil as was seen in the previous chapter of this work. At this point, therefore, the importance of thought in relation to committing evil was clear to her and she was ready to write about it<sup>343</sup>, having understood it<sup>344</sup> (LMT 3-6). The relation between these two is clearly stated by Socrates and in true Arendtian style, she practised it as well, as I have been able to point out in the previous subsections of this chapter. Arendt practised what she preached. When

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<sup>342</sup> Cf. Buckler claims, "The loss or abdication of the ability to think is a central and decisive feature of our modern experience. Thoughtlessness points us equally to the loss of a common sense, also a feature of totalitarian conditions, and also, therefore, to the loss of the ability to judge." (Buckler, S., (2011), *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*, pg. 30)

<sup>343</sup> Arendt says, she only wrote once she herself had had the chance to think it through (EU 3).

<sup>344</sup> In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt explores the mental activities of thinking and willing, in an attempt to trace the uncontestable evil of Eichmann's deeds to a deeper level or roots or motives (LMT 4). In it she is also "concerned with the problem of Action, the oldest concern of political theory, and what had always troubled me about it was that the very term I adopted for my reflections on the matter, namely, *vita activa*, was coined by men who were devoted to the contemplative way of life and who looked upon all kinds of being alive from that perspective." (LMT 6)

Arendt had doubts, her tendency was to first go back to ancient studies. In this case, she goes back to Socrates in order to analyse thinking in relation to evil.

Buckler was of the opinion that “In Arendt’s account, Socrates, in combining the roles of thinker and interlocutor, was able to stimulate the capacity for thought in others who may otherwise remain unreflective”.<sup>345</sup> Arendt also commends Socrates for being able to combine thinking and action when she describes him to be one, “who in his person unified two apparently contradictory passions, for thinking and acting” (LMT 167) and for the fact that he “was equally at home in both spheres and able to move from one sphere to the other with the greatest apparent ease” (ibid.). This could arguably provide another reason as to why Arendt chose Socrates as a model. Arendt herself is known for her capacity to provoke thought and reflection. In “Thinking and Moral Considerations”, she justifies that Socrates was able to ‘perplex’ others without imposing truth on them (RJ 88).

Arendt uses the term ‘quest’ for meaning where Socrates talks about love as a need. She goes on to point out that,

“the objects of love can only be lovable things – beauty, wisdom, justice, and so on. Ugliness and evil are almost by definition excluded from the thinking concern. They may turn up as deficiencies, ugliness consisting in lack of beauty, evil, *kakia*, in lack of the good. As such, they have no roots of their own, no essence that thought could get hold of.” (LMT 179)

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<sup>345</sup> Buckler, S. (2011). *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory: Challenging the tradition*, pg. 32.

Here again she brings up the fact that evil has no roots. She goes on to confirm by this that this is why Socrates believed that “no one can do evil voluntarily” (LMT 179). In other words, if men act they do so thinking that what they do is actually good – always, – and never evil.<sup>346</sup> This means that if men are incapable of doing evil, then if they did, it would be because to them it is good or put differently, it is apparently good. Basing on this kind of reasoning, Eichmann therefore, would have acted as he did because to him, what he was doing was good (apparently), otherwise, he would not have done it.

Before going further, it would be of interest to note that Arendt brings up the concept of love<sup>347</sup> in Socrates as what she herself terms her “quest” for meaning (LMT 178). She says, “Love as Eros is primarily a need; it desires what it has not” (LMT 178). Then she says, “Because thought’s quest is a kind of desirous love, the objects of thought can only be loveable things.” (LMT 179). It is on this account that she concludes by saying that for Socrates, “people who are not in love with beauty, justice, and wisdom are incapable of thought, just as, conversely, those who are in love with examining and thus ‘do philosophy’ would be incapable of doing evil.”

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<sup>346</sup> Bradshaw, in her book, *Acting and Thinking*, claims that “Arendt apparently excluded thought from among the activities that constitute the *vita activa*” and asks: “Why did Arendt categorically exclude thought from her analysis?” (Bradshaw, L. (1989) *Acting and Thinking*, pg. 20). Arendt does not exclude thought from among the activities of the *vita activa* since she herself claims that ‘What appears in the outside world in addition to physical signs is only what we make of them through the operation of thought.’ In other words, reflection is necessary for action. She also said manifestation of thought is through speech that is understandable by others. If anything, thought was considered of such importance that she proceeded to dedicate a whole book to it (*The life of the Mind*, 1978) much as she did not tackle it in depth in *The Human Condition* as one of the essential human conditions.

<sup>347</sup> She points out that she is referring to the Greek *Erōs* and not the Christian *agapē* kind of love.

The question now asked is, “Is it only people inspired by the Socratic *erōs*, the love of wisdom, beauty and justice, (...) capable of thought and can be trusted?” (LMT 179-180) Was this the case of Eichmann – ‘lack of love of wisdom, beauty and justice’?

For Arendt, much as evil is not done voluntarily, one ought not to conclude that “Everybody wants to do good” (LMT 180) because this is also not true. In fact, she says, “The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.” (ibid.) If they did not make up their minds, or did not really think about it, how come they did it? Her conclusion is the following; “If there is anything in thinking that can prevent men from doing evil, it must be some property inherent in the activity itself, regardless of its objects.” (LMT 180) This implies the performance of the act itself.

Before going into greater detail of this, a look at Socrates reasoning, which Arendt tends to always fall back on, is in order. There are the two Socratic propositions that are relevant to this discussion. The first is, “It is better to be wronged than to do wrong” and the second, “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 me.”<sup>348</sup> More importantly than whether it is good for me or for you or ‘who is better off’, Arendt points to the fact that, a wrong has been done and that “As citizens, we must prevent wrong-doing because the world in which we all live, wrong-doer, wrong-sufferer, and spectator, is at stake; the City has been wronged.” (LMT 182).

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<sup>348</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*. Irwin, T. (Trans.) Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. 474b; 483a, b; 482c.

To Arendt, Socrates was not referring to “the person of the citizen” (ibid.) but rather to one who is “in love with wisdom and philosophising” (ibid.). The person of the citizen, is concerned with the world more than with himself. According to her, this does not pose a problem. First because the second statement is a prerequisite for the first proposition and the fact that Socrates does not refer to the person of the citizen, will not harm the second proposition.

Her reasoning is that it is not possible to be in or out of harmony with oneself as Socrates suggests when he talks of ‘being one’. She explains that, “Socrates talks of being one and *therefore* not being able to risk getting out of harmony with himself.” (LMT 183) implying that to be one is to be in harmony with oneself as can be assumed from her emphasis on the ‘*therefore*’. In other words, for her, one is always one. If it is one it cannot be out of harmony; in her own words, “nothing that is identical with itself, truly and absolutely *One*, as A is A, can be either in or out of harmony with itself.” (ibid.).

To begin with, for her, being just one in harmony is not possible without there being at least two. Her argument is that, “Certainly, when I appear and am seen by others, I am one; otherwise I would be unrecognisable.” (LMT 183)<sup>349</sup> If, on the other hand, there should ever be a discord in *consciousness* – to know with myself – “the curious fact that in a sense I also am for myself, though I hardly appear to me” (ibid.), it would result in the above mentioned ‘difference’ being ‘inserted in my Oneness’. My Oneness remains but with a difference (LMT 183) and it is this ‘difference’, which is only in conscience, that in her opinion, Socrates was referring to.

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<sup>349</sup> Elsewhere, Arendt says, the thinker, “when he is called by his name back into the world of appearances, where he is always One, it is as though the two into which the thinking process had split him clapped together again.” (LMT 185)

Therefore, in the second Socratic statement, Socrates would rather not have this difference inserted in his One harmonious being. Rather, it is better for the One to be wronged, harmonious or otherwise, but as the One in his entirety. Arendt goes on to speak more about this ‘difference’.

“We know of this difference in other respects. Everything that exists among a plurality of things is not simply what it is, in its identity, but it is also different from others; this being different belongs to its very nature. When we try to get hold of it in thought, wanting to define it, we must take this otherness (*altereitas*) or difference into account.” (LMT 183)

This ‘difference in other respects’, other refers to anything other than difference in the conscience. Here it is applicable to the individual person who ‘exists among a plurality’ of others and yet much as they are all human, the individual is different from each one of them, much as they are all the ‘same’. His being different belongs to his very nature, implying that Tom is not John, for instance. The explanation and content of the above paragraph coincides with the citation above, when she says, ‘this being different belongs to its very nature’ closely identifies it with her concept of plurality as analysed in Chapter 1 of this work.

If one were to apply the above to the case of Eichmann, one could say that Eichmann continued in his state of this One harmonious being. One could say that he did not want the ‘difference’ in conscience. Saying this would imply that Eichmann had actually given it some thought in order to make a sound judgement and yet according to Arendt, he would fall among the many who ‘never made up their mind to be or do either good or evil’ (LMT 180). But as has been seen, for Arendt, Eichmann did not think. That means that his actions were not the result of conscious decision making. He simply ‘functioned’ or did what he thought he had

to do without seemingly having reflected on his actions or the consequences thereof.

#### 4.2.2 Spectators and Judging

In antiquity, Arendt explains that, as ancient philosophers hold, wonder is the beginning of thinking. In relation to this, she notes in her *Denktagebuch*;

“If wonder is the beginning of thinking, then the thinker is always the spectator. To wonder at the spectacle of the world means: I withdraw from the world to look at it as a spectacle (...) I now judge as though I had no part.”<sup>350</sup>

As noted above, ‘the thinker is always the spectator’. The spectator plays a vital role since he is not the actor and only observes from the “outside” so to speak and is therefore in a better position to make a judgement. This is an important aspect. Socrates does not explicitly mention a spectator or witness of his actions or thoughts, much as there is such a witness (the *daimonion*) who steps in every time he is about to do something wrong. He steps in when Socrates steps out of line<sup>351</sup>. In Socrates’ case, he is his own witness and therefore his own spectator, hence implying reflexivity as well as reflectivity.

Previously in chapter 3 it was seen why Arendt holds that in order to think and therefore to make a judgement, one has to take a step back. In the same Heft of the above mentioned *Denktagebuch*, she says, “In order

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<sup>350</sup> *Denktagebuch*, Heft XXVII September 1970, [85] pg. 796.

<sup>351</sup> Plato, *Apology* 31c–d, 40a.

to think, one needs to stand back, to distance oneself.”<sup>352</sup> Arendt explains that those not performing, perceive appearances and are therefore spectators who are subjected to ‘actors on a stage’ (those who appear). In other words, for her it is the spectator, not directly involved in the action, who is in a better position to think and to make a judgement.<sup>353</sup> Applying this to the situation Eichmann was in, he was definitely an actor at his trial. He was not in the position of spectator and this could have prevented him from stepping back or distancing himself in order to give thought to what he was doing.

It is worthwhile mentioning that for Arendt, spectators are necessary not just to think and make a judgement, but they also help to confirm reality. She makes several references to this as can be seen below,

“For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality. (HC 50)

“The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves” (HC 50)

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<sup>352</sup> My translation from the original phrase: “Um zu denken, brauche ich Abstand, Ferne” (*Denktagebuch* Heft XXVII [79], pg. 793). It has been seen how she herself as a political theorist practiced this.

<sup>353</sup> This also implies that it is the individual who makes the judgement based on his personal thinking. Individual judgement may therefore not provide a general moral code of conduct since it is subjective. This is why Arendt identifies three maxims of thought which Urabayen summarises to be: “thinking for oneself, putting oneself in another’s shoes, and thinking in a consistent manner.” (Urabayen, J., (2014) “Hannah Arendt’s Thinking without bannisters: Reflection on action”, in *Reflection on Morality in Contemporary Philosophy Performing and Ongoing Phenomenology*, Olms, pg. 163)

“The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember,” (HC 95)

To Arendt, the confirmation of reality has a lot to do with the spectators.<sup>354</sup> Could this perhaps be the reason as to why Eichmann seemingly lived as if he did not know what he was doing or that he was collaborating in radical evil? According to Arendt, spectators think and help to give the world some sort of perspective since it is they who make the judgements. It is therefore important, what they think and how this thinking can be influenced. ‘All thinking demands a *stop-and-think*’ implying interrupting any doing, any ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be (LMT 78; RJ 164). Only after this stop is thinking possible so that a judgement can be made and moral implications be made manifest<sup>355</sup>. In fact, for her, “Without spectators the world would be imperfect” (LMT 133-134). Being able to judge and to judge rightly is thus of utmost importance when it comes to the morality of the act. In *The Life of the Mind Thinking* as well as in “Thinking and Moral Considerations”, Arendt says,

“If the ability to tell right from wrong should have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise in every sane person no matter how erudite or

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<sup>354</sup> Birmingham explains that for Arendt, the principle of plurality demands that in the public space one has to be truly seen and heard. Otherwise, one is simply the fool or idiot “who speaks or acts without significance, which is just another kind of invisibility.” (Birmingham, P. (2006). *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington & Indianapolis, pg. 59)

<sup>355</sup> Urabayen explains that according to Arendt, thinking breaks fixed habits and prepares an open space for judgement. She also advocates that the role of Philosophy through critical thought, understanding and judgement, the world can be made a humane place. (Urabayen, J., (2011) “El papel de la filosofía en Hannah Arendt.” In *La filosofía primera*. Ediciones Diálogo Filosófico Vol. 8, pg. 526-527).

ignorant, how intelligent or stupid he may happen to be.” (LMT 13; RJ 164).

The above observations are closely linked to her observation of the figure of Adolf Eichmann during his 1961 trial. Like several other survivors of a WWII concentration camp, she was curious to see who Eichmann was<sup>356</sup> “insofar as he was a free agent”<sup>357</sup> and therefore capable of having acted differently had he wanted to.<sup>358</sup>

Arendt had the chance to be a spectator of Eichmann. She was in a position to judge not just him but the trial as well since she was not actively involved.<sup>359</sup> According to Venmans, Arendt placed greater emphasis on his words, given that his face did not reveal anything significant.<sup>360</sup> This may be the case, but the point is that Arendt was able to observe it all. That is why Arendt, is able to dedicate the whole of the

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<sup>356</sup> In her letter to Karl Jaspers dated December 2, 1960 she writes, “I would never be able to forgive myself if I didn’t go and look at this walking disaster face to face in all his bizarre vacuousness, without the mediation of the printed word.” (AJC 409-411)

<sup>357</sup> Arendt, H., (2009), *The Jewish Writings*, pg. 475.

<sup>358</sup> As was seen in the previous chapter, in her answers to questions submitted by Samuel Grafton to Hannah Arendt, she responds to one of his questions by saying, “I have been thinking for many years, or to be specific for thirty years, about the nature of evil.” (JW 465) She submitted her answers on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1963 implying that her quest to understand the nature of evil started in the 1930s. The other motivational factor that sent her to the trial in Jerusalem was her interest in “the nature of evil.” (JW 475, 476)

<sup>359</sup> This is consistent about what she says about the spectator being in a better position to make a judgement since they are not the actors. This was covered in Chapter 2 of this work.

<sup>360</sup> According to Venmans, Arendt only paid attention to Eichmann’s impassibility, apathy and total indifference. (Venmans, Peter, (2005), *El mundo según Hannah Arendt*, pg. 150) (my translation). This is consistent with Arendt’s way of understanding man given that she placed greater emphasis on words and speech as being self-revealing and a means of distinguishing oneself. (HC 26, 176)

second chapter of the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, to describe him under the title; *The Accused* (EJ 21-35). There is another, though much briefer, description of him in her book *Life of the Mind Thinking*, at the end of which she makes her judgement of him being ‘thoughtless’. It kind of sums it up thus;

“I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer...The deeds were monstrous, but the doer...was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither demonic nor monstrous. There was no sign in him of firm ideological convictions or of specific evil motives, and the only notable characteristic one could detect in his past behaviour as well as in his behaviour during the trial and throughout the pre-trial police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but *thoughtlessness*.” (LMT 4)

In her 1971 lecture published as “Thinking and Moral Consideration”, we find a similar description of Eichmann where she again stresses her judgement of what was wrong with him, namely that “it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think.” (RJ 159) In her opinion therefore, the man Eichmann was not stupid. Neither was he a monster as people expected that he would be<sup>361</sup> (JW 482). She also claimed that Eichmann was not wicked. She clarifies that,

“Inability to think is not stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people, and wickedness is hardly its cause, if only because thoughtlessness as well as stupidity are much more frequent phenomena than wickedness. The trouble is precisely that no wicked heart, (...), is necessary to cause great evil.”

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<sup>361</sup> She says, “I did not ‘downgrade Eichmann’, the evidence did.” (JW 482) Meaning that in her writings she merely described him as she perceived him to be, factually. She reported that he was not a monster because he was not one.

(RJ 164).

Just because Eichmann was not wicked and because he did not think, does not mean that he was stupid. Above she distinguishes between wickedness and stupidity mainly because she claims that Kant would probably have disagreed. She quotes Kant to have said, “Stupidity is caused by a wicked heart” (RJ 164). She goes on to say, “Hence, in Kantian terms, one would need philosophy, the exercise of reason as the faculty of thought, to prevent evil.” (LMT 13; RJ 164).<sup>362</sup> She then concludes that thinking is not for the few and that it is not “the monopoly of a specialised discipline” (LMT 13). Rather it is and ought to be exercised by all—a human condition so to speak because it is necessary for all human beings. What she implies is that if this task were left to the philosophers or thinkers, then they would be the only ones able to avoid evil. This is not true and would be disastrous since it is not only philosophers who live and act in this world.

The man, Eichmann, therefore, in as far as Arendt was concerned, “Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal (...). He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realised what he was doing*” (EJ 287), and that “He was not stupid” (EJ 287) but that it was “sheer thoughtlessness” not stupidity “that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.” This is what she says was so “banal” about it (EJ 288). This would be her general judgement of him, made as a spectator, removed from the scene.

In as far as Arendt is concerned, Eichmann’s ‘crime’ was; ‘remoteness from reality’ and ‘thoughtlessness’ (EJ 288). The moral implications of

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<sup>362</sup> Previously, it was seen that Arendt makes a distinction between wickedness and stupidity. Refer to subsection 3.1.1.

such qualities for any man especially one that was in Eichmann's position, are and were outrageous<sup>363</sup>. It was not just Eichmann, who in a 'banal' way, became great criminals. In her *Answers to Questions submitted by Samuel Grafton*, she answers one of Grafton's questions by saying, "It is of course true that evil was common-place in Nazi Germany and that 'there were many Eichmanns,' as the title of a German book about Eichmann reads. But I did not mean this." (JW 479) she clarifies. Rather, she says,

"I meant that evil is not *radical*, going to the roots (*radix*), that it has no depth, and that for this very reason it is so terribly difficult to think about, since thinking, by definition, wants to reach the roots. Evil is a surface phenomenon, and instead of being radical, it is merely extreme. We resist evil by not being swept away by the surface of things, by stopping ourselves and beginning to think-that is, by reaching another dimension than the horizon of everyday life. In other words, the more superficial someone is, the more likely he will be to yield to evil. That is the banality of evil." (JW 479)

From the above quote, Eichmann, seemingly did not resist evil and was 'swept away by the surface of things'. At the end of the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she claims that his superficiality was at a level that served him to such an extent that he "completely beclouded the reality of his own death" (EJ 288) and that it was such 'remoteness from reality' and 'thoughtlessness' as quoted earlier (EJ 288) that can wreak 'more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together' (ibid.).

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<sup>363</sup> No one has as yet been able to give exact figures of the Jewish victims as well as all those who perished as a result of the *Final Solution* suggested by Adolf Hitler. Estimates are at between four and a half and six million but this has never been verified.

In the above quote, it was also seen that thinking, by definition, ‘wants to reach the roots’ while evil is a ‘surface phenomenon’ that is unable to reach the roots (JW 479) because there are none. To think one must stop all other activity. Non-thinking, however, is something else. According to Arendt, non-thinking is recommendable for political and moral affairs (LMT 177) because it shields people “from the dangers of examination” holding fast to “whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society” (ibid.). Her claim is that it is easy to exchange this set of rules for any other if one does not think. By non-thinking, people lose sight of the content of the rules and become more concerned with the actual “*possession*” of them (LMT 177). In Arendt’s opinion,

“The more firmly men hold to the old code, the more eager will they be to assimilate themselves to the new one, which in practice means that the readiest to obey will be those who were the most respectable pillars of society, the least likely to indulge in thoughts, dangerous or otherwise, while those who to all appearances were the most unreliable elements of the old order will be the least tractable.” (LMT 177)

What she is implying here is that those who hold firmly to codes think less when she says that they are ‘the least likely to indulge in thoughts’. She also identifies them as the ‘most respectable in society’. This is a dangerous state for any society to be in as well as a morally volatile one, as it would only depend on who has brought his set of rules and what is their content. They would only have to present these to the non-thinking crowd that is least likely to think and is most respectable (ibid.). This is pretty much what has been happening in society in the post-modern age where even the basic concept of family has changed. Given this formula, one could suppose that Eichmann was a victim of similar circumstances and accepted the code of rules that was presented to him, as it was

presented to him, presumably without reflection. Given that Arendt judged him to be thoughtless, and presumably with no guilty conscience, this would not have been hard for him to do. Eichmann was at one with himself and just carried on with what was expected of him regardless of the moral implications.

#### 4.2.3 Plurality and thinking

As was seen previously in the subsection above, it is better for the One to be wronged. This One is the individual in his entirety. According to Arendt the individual is always *one* in the world of appearances (LMT 185) and becomes *two-in-one* in the thinking process (ibid.). During the thinking process, “I am both the one who asks and the one who answers” (ibid.). This is very similar to the case of Socrates who stops ‘himself’ when he steps out of line as was seen at the beginning of the previous subsection. Arendt’s “duality of myself with myself” (ibid.) which occurs as mental dialogue as is the case with Socrates, also implies reflexivity.

When Arendt comments on the criterion of this dialogue, she is of the mind that it is agreement and not truth as it used to be, that is of importance for there to be harmony. This means that the principle or standard now used is that of agreement in the mind so that there is coincidence between the two-in-one, and no ‘difference’.

“The criterion of the mental dialogue is no longer truth, which would compel answers to the questions I raise with myself, either in the mode of Intuition, which compels with the force of sense evidence, or as necessary conclusions of reckoning with consequences in mathematical or logical reasoning, which rely on the structure of our brain and compel with its natural power. The only criterion of Socratic thinking is agreement, to

be consistent with oneself, *homologeîn autos heautō*.<sup>364</sup> its opposite, to be in contradiction with oneself, *emantia legeîn autos heautō*,<sup>365</sup> actually means becoming one's own adversary." (LMT 185-186)

Basing on what Arendt mentions in the citation above, Arendt implies that the criterion used should actually be that of truth and not that of consistency with oneself as is used in Socratic thinking. This in turn implies that it is possible that solely using the Socratic thinking<sup>366</sup> criteria may be erroneous and that one may be in agreement with oneself but in the wrong, as was the case with Eichmann. In other words, agreement with oneself is not necessarily always true. The criterion of non-contradiction, she mentions, is "decisive only for the inward dialogue of thinking" (LMT 186) and not as "the most basic rule for discourse in general" (ibid.). As an example, she claims that the ego – the I-am-I – experiences difference in identity precisely when it not related to the things that appear but only related to itself. (LMT 187) In other words, she is not against the criterion of non-contradiction but only cautions that this should be done within context.

This shift of criteria, she to some extent blames on Kant (EU 186-187), who wrote; "Always think consistently, in agreement with yourself"

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<sup>364</sup> She quotes from *Protagoras*, 339c.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 339b, 340b.

<sup>366</sup> Cf. Sigwart gives his own interpretation of what Arendt meant by thinking citizens as opposed to philosophers, "The thinking of citizens is, firstly, an interpretive practice of *political integration of particulars*. As such, it, secondly, implies a constant civic practice of interpretive *self-localization* which, thirdly, generates *the pluralist and at the same time common perspective of a political "We."* Within this framework, finally, political experience turns out to constitute *a bounded form of enlarged mentality*." (Sigwart, HJ. (2016) *The Wondering Thought of Hannah Arendt*. Behr, H. & Rösch, F. (Eds.) Newcastle, UK; Macmillan. Pg. 65.)

(“*Jederzeit mit mir selbst einstimmig denken*”) and presented it among the “maxims that must be regarded as ‘unchangeable commandments for the class of thinkers’”<sup>367</sup> (LMT 186-187). Kant is widely read and renown, so it comes as no surprise on how this shift could have happened and become so widespread. On this, Arendt is of a different mind because for her, difference and otherness are necessary conditions for existence. This is how she sums it up;

“In brief, the specifically human actualisation 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, and this ego – the I-am-I – experiences difference in identity precisely when it is not related to the things that appear but only related to itself.” (LMT 187)

In the text above, she again highlights that ‘difference and otherness’ are necessary conditions for existence of man’s mental ego, which exists only in duality. The correct context therefore, for the application of the ‘criterion of contradiction’ is that of inward dialogue. When there is a difference or disagreement in this duality, then there is a difference in identity. Difference in identity has resulted in the modern day fashionable identity crises, where we now witness individuals who claim an apparent lack of harmony between one’s mind and one’s body and people making claims of feeling ‘trapped’ in a body that should never have been theirs, so to speak. In her opinion, this identity search is a futile one. Namely because the ego is being related to ‘things that

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<sup>367</sup> She quotes from “Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten.” *Werke*, No. 56, vol. VI, pg. 549.

appear' instead of to itself. Things that appear, as has just been seen, belong to a different domain. Thereby meaning that, due to this duality, comparing my mind with my body would not be in order, and the idea of one 'being trapped in a different body' would be an invalid argument. Basically, for her, the individual One is always the same and appears to everyone as the same One. In *The Human Condition* she writes,

“Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.” (HC 57)

In other words, it is necessary that the identity of the same object does not vary. The expression 'sameness in utter diversity' used above is Arendt's concept of plurality, as well as the fact that it is many who need to see this diversity and still be able to identify the same object, thereby confirming reality as was seen previously. For Arendt, “If the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men, ..., can prevent the destruction of the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality.” (HC 58) This is necessary for 'worldly reality truly and reliably appear' as it is to everyone. It explains why things need to be recognised for what they are and why truths need to always be recognised for what they are. The sameness of the objects needs to be discerned otherwise, the common world would be destroyed (HC 58) because then, as a consequence, realities or truths would no longer be recognised for what they are by everyone. It is a necessary starting point for reality and truth.

Nevertheless, it is possible and it has happened that the sameness of objects can and is no longer discerned. Arendt mentions two conditions under which this is possible; “under conditions of radical isolation, where nobody can any longer agree with anybody else” and “under

conditions of mass society or mass hysteria, where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbour.” (HC 58) She goes on to explain,

“In both instances, men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. 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)

This is why plurality is of such vital importance. The presence of others helps confirm reality. In a prior sub-section it was seen that “reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all” (HC 244). If reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all then in the same way, their presence is necessary to guarantee reality. Does it follow then, that their presence also guarantees truth?

It will be well to take a closer look at when the two conditions for sameness of objects cannot be recognised or truth cannot be guaranteed, according to Arendt, as well as her explanation, that the way of doing this is by radical isolation or by making one of a multitude of many i.e. making them entirely private.

One way of radically isolating oneself is to claim omnipotence as was seen is the case in an attempt to overcome the unpredictability of action. But man, by himself alone as an omnipotent<sup>368</sup> being destroys plurality

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<sup>368</sup> This was covered in great detail in chapter 2 (sub-section 2.2.2) of this work as well.

<sup>369</sup> (HC 234). More on this will be seen in the next chapter. Radical isolation therefore also destroys man. The temptation to want to be omnipotent or to radically isolate oneself are means adopted in an effort to overcome the unpredictability and irreversibility of action. They go contrary to plurality.

Conclusively, the one thing that can be done when one is in isolation or not in the company of others is to think. Thinking is a private activity and everyone should be able to engage the thinking faculty because the use of this has serious moral implications. It also implies that thinking is a necessary condition because thinking conditions against committing evil. In this chapter, it has been seen how Arendt, as an actor, understands, faces and challenges evil. She stands up to it as opposed to Eichmann and so becomes a truth-teller. She bases her reasoning on Socratic ideas and so, through thinking, is able to reconcile herself with evil. It is thinking that binds action and morality and results in good actions which are of primary interest in the next chapter, and the whole point of this study.

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<sup>369</sup> Refer to subsection on Political action and morality.



## Chapter 5: Towards Radical Good

Though evil is a central concept in Arendt's thought and a main theme that came up with her publication of the Eichmann trial and several ensuing publications after that, I would like to point out that her having to deal with the theme of evil and its banality, are consequential. Her effort to try to arrive at a better understanding of the phenomenon of evil did not stop there either as is evidenced in her continued search for a better grasping of this truth. The prior chapter shows the importance of the engagement of the thinking faculty as crucial in the prevention of evil. It was also seen that it is thinking that binds action and morality and that it results in good actions. In the following pages, I propose an analysis of Arendt's concept of good from the point of view of the human condition in relation to her theory of action and her moral thought. This will show that Arendt's human condition is such that at the centre of it all is the good.

### 5.1 Concept of Good

At the very beginning of Arendt's formative years of graduate study at the university, in the book *Love and Saint Augustine*, she draws attention to the Augustinian view that,

“Since no part in this universe, no human life and no part of this life, can possess its own autonomous significance, there can be no “evil” (*malum*). There are only “goods” (*bona*) in

their proper order, which may merely *seem* evil from the transient perspective of the individual (*singulum*).” (LSA 60)

From the very beginning, Arendt analysis of evil, consequentially results in an analysis of the good. The two go together. In this particular instance, she goes on to show that, “that person is wicked who tries in vain to escape the predetermined harmony of the whole” (LSA 61). What this implies is that, Arendt’s interpretation of that which is good, is that one has to remain in harmony with the whole. The whole for her at this stage could be the world or Socrates’ I-am-I. This implies that to remain within this harmony is what is good (LSA 65). To want to remain or be a part of this harmony has an underlying tone of love and concern for the world (*ibid.*, 77, 81) as previously described in the first chapter of this work. It is also what is necessary in order for one to do good.<sup>370</sup>

When Arendt talks about good as a concept, in her very first work, *Love and Saint Augustine*, she does so at the very beginning of her first page which could be an indication of its primacy in importance. She describes it at length in the following quote:

“The thing we know and desire is a "good" (*bonum*), otherwise we would not seek it for its own sake. All the goods we desire in our questing love are independent objects, unrelated to other objects. Each of them represents nothing but its isolated goodness. The distinctive trait of this good that we desire is that we do not have it. Once we have the object our desire ends, unless we are threatened with its loss (...). It is because we know happiness that we want to be happy, and since nothing is more certain than our wanting to be happy (*beatum*

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<sup>370</sup> Audi says that that which is intrinsically good deserves a reason for action. (Audi, R. (2013). *Valor moral y diversidad humana*. Mauri, M. (Trans.) Avarigani, pg. 69)

*esse velle*), our notion of happiness guides us in determining the respective goods that then became objects of our desires.<sup>371</sup> Craving, or love, is a human being's possibility of gaining possession of the good that will make him happy" (LSA 9)

The quote has a definite Augustinian ring to it, nevertheless, what Arendt highlights is the identification of the good as something that is desired for its own sake, and that this desire is ongoing until we have it. The other thing is that 'our notion of happiness guides us' in determining what that good is. When it comes to the good therefore, desire and identification seem to be key. First, one has to know what the good is and then it can be desired for itself<sup>372</sup>. She again holds that "Happiness (*beatitudo*) consists in possession, in having and holding (*habere et tenere*) our good, and even more in being sure of not losing it" (HC 10). One could well claim that Arendt says this because of Augustine. Undoubtedly, I would agree that there is some Augustinian influence in what she writes at this stage. However, I would also argue that Arendt continues to hold many these ideas in later years with few variations as shall consequently be shown.

Arendt talks about an absolute good which Augustine refers to as *summum bonum* (LSA 13). For Augustine, this is eternity which to him is that which "you cannot lose against your will" as Arendt quotes him to say (*ibid.*). She disagrees with Augustine on this saying that what she understands is that to him, absolute good is lack or absence of fear of

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<sup>371</sup> Here she gives supporting evidence to be from *Enchiridion* 28, 104 and 105; *The Free Choice of Will II*, 16, 41; Sermon 306, 3 and 4; [*The Happy Life* 2, 10].

<sup>372</sup> Mauri writes about this in her book, *Bien humano y moralidad*. She also holds that conceptual considerations necessarily precede action, thereby implying that thought comes before action. In Arendt's case, the conceptual consideration would be the desire mentioned above. (Mauri, M. (1989). *Bien humano y moralidad*. Barcelona: PPU, pg. 34.)

losing the good thus making it negative because “the fact of fear remains” as well as its lack of content (LSA 11, 13) since it is unobtainable in mortal life as she will later argue in “What is Authority?”, first published in 1958 about thirty years later (BPF 137). In 1953, she will again describe *summum bonum* in an article entitled “The Ex-Communists” published in *The Commonweal*, March 20.

“The *summum bonum* which, according to St. Augustine, was the only good which I was permitted to enjoy for its own sake, while all the other goods I was asked to use only as means to an end, was not of this world; it could organize all other *bona*, put them into a certain hierarchy, become, in other words, the chief criterion, the standard of all actions and judgments (...). This is true for all the traditional concepts of the end of politics: the commonweal, the happiness of the greater number, the good life, etc. – none of which are transcendent in the absolute sense of a *summum bonum*. Strictly speaking, they are not *political ends*.” (EU 395)

Arendt maintains her understanding and interpretation of Augustine’s *summum bonum* as a transcendent good that is enjoyed for its own sake. Therefore, it is not applicable in the political sphere. Now, the human condition is such that there is a plurality of individual men. For Arendt, this implies that each individual man may understand the good to be something different, each identifying their own individual *bona* but that in the end, all are agreed on wanting to live. (HC 10) Thus, she says with Augustine, that “the good love craves is life, and the evil fear shuns is death” (ibid.). Augustine himself identifies life as the highest good as she herself points out.

Arendt will again examine this when she writes *The Human Condition*. At this stage of her philosophical formation, however, she is of the

opinion that life cannot be the highest good because, “life, too, becomes a ‘thing,’ an object that disappears from the world and, like all other objects of our desires, does not endure” (HC 16). Since life does not endure then it is actually not a transcendent good. She is right in this interpretation in as far as physical life is concerned and that is why, in the absolute sense, the *summum bonum* is not and cannot be a political end.

Later in subsection 44 of *The Human Condition*, Arendt revisits this and writes her review and understanding of life. There she gives her description of life and gives her explanation as to why it (life) has been considered to be the highest good in modern times. Her reasoning given is that ever since the modern age, life has asserted itself as the ultimate point of reference and it has remained so in contemporary times (HC 313). It started when Christian immortality of human life reversed the ancient relationship between man and the world. Christians, she claims, – here she specifically mentions Paul the apostle, who was also a roman citizen – consciously shaped their concept of immortality after the Roman model (EU 58)<sup>373</sup>, “substituting the individual life for the political life of the body politic.” (HC 315). In other words, human life was seen to be immortal and all other things were seen to be as passing.

This for Arendt, was disastrous for the esteem and dignity of politics which sank to the low level of an activity such that the *homo faber*<sup>374</sup> was defeated, losing to *animal laborans* who became the dominating or

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<sup>373</sup> She will comment on this again in an article she published in German as "Berliner Salon." (Arendt. H., (1932). "Berliner Salon." In *Deutscher Almanach*, Leipzig. Kimber, R., & Kimber, R. (Trans.))

<sup>374</sup> The *homo faber* is the man working and fabricating and building a world inhabited by other but an *animal laborans* merely performs the activity of labour for sustenance (HC 22). Arendt also refers to them as the “labour of our body and the work of our hands respectively.” (HC 85)

superior 'species' (HC 313). Her claim is that "man's present life is being neglected for the sake of his future and loses its meaningfulness and weight" at present (ibid.). She further argues that, the 'highest good' on earth being 'possessed' in the act of striving for it, as Augustine proposes "is, of course, a contradiction in terms" (ibid.). Basically, she does not see how this can be possible. At this stage, therefore, "The 'good' of which man is deprived and which he therefore desires, is life without death and without loss." (HC 33, 34, 35). She herself is not in agreement with this view as argued.

Arendt points out that Christianity has always insisted that life, though it had no longer a final end, still has a definite beginning, and that without this life, there could be no eternal life (HC 316). Rather, Christianity considered *vita contemplativa* to be superior to *vita activa* as was pointed out previously in Chapter 2<sup>375</sup>. This is how she came to say that, "Within the diversity of the human condition with its various human capacities, it was precisely life that overruled all other considerations." (HC 313). In other words, only with the rise of Christianity, then into the modern age and up until this day, has life on earth become the highest good of man (HC 318-319).

Towards the end, in *The Human Condition*, when she speaks about the highest good, she refers to life being the "only point of reference" (HC 320). If it is the highest good then there can be nothing better than life. Good is therefore something to aim for and try to attain, to live for and to 'die' for. This is opposed to what she wrote about life in *Love and Saint Augustine*. There she interpreted Augustine to mean that, "Insofar

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<sup>375</sup> Arendt spoke against the abasement of the *vita activa* (HC 16) but clarified that, "my use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*." (HC 17)

as man loves this [B:033 15 I] ‘highest good,’ he loves no one but himself, that is, that of himself which is the true object of all self-love: his own essence” (LSA 26). This implies that when man loves his true self, he loves his essence identified as God (ibid.). She disagrees with this because, to her, man cannot love his own essence, because for her, when he looks for his true self, “He finds existence instead of essence, and existence is unreliable.” (LSA 26) Here again, we see Arendt relating essence to existence as elaborated in chapter 1. One could argue that this reasoning is actually due to the influence of Heidegger<sup>376</sup> given that she was still studying under him. This is something to which I would agree given her age and want of maturity in philosophy at that time.

In *The Human Condition*, she also agrees with Aristotle that the “good life” was the life of the citizen (HC 36). She explains that

“It was ‘good’ to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labour and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process.” (HC 37).

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<sup>376</sup> The Heideggerian touch is more obvious in her explanation: “human essence is by definition (*incommutabilis*), it stands in flagrant contradiction to human existence, which is subject to time and which changes from day to day, from hour to hour, appearing through birth from non-being and disappearing through death into non-being. So long as man exists, he *is* not. He can only anticipate his essence by striving for eternity.” (LAS 26). Cf. It is commonly supposed that Arendt’s ideas were heavily influenced by Heidegger. See for example, the following text, “Arendt lo visitaba siempre que él se lo permitía, segura de que solo ella podía aliviar sus depresiones y ayudarle a recuperar la paz necesaria para su trabajo.” Ettinger, E., (1996), *Hannah Arendt y Martin Heidegger*, Barcelona: TusQuets, pg. 20)

As mentioned in Chapter 2, a good work is one that is hidden or not known by anyone, and if possible not even by the actor. In *The Human Condition* Arendt explains that, “each human activity points to its proper location in the world” (HC 73). By this she means to specify that there are acts that need to be hidden in the private realm while there are other acts that need to be displayed publicly if they are to exist or to be acknowledged at all. This is in line with what was seen with respect to the public and private realms discussed previously in subsection 2.3.

Apart from a good work having to be hidden, a good work also has to be willed meaning that one must want to do good. This is Kantian, “Nothing in the world—indeed nothing even beyond the world—can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a good will”<sup>377</sup>. Arendt cites this very well-known phrase in her article entitled, “Some Questions on Moral Philosophy” (RJ 71). She makes reference to this in her later years given that the article was written between 1965-1966.

In her very last published work, in which she examines the “nature of the willing capacity and its foundations in the life of the mind” (LMW 6), she investigates post-classical and pre-modern literature testifying to the mental experiences that caused its discovery as well as to those that the discovery itself caused. Her literature covers “the period from Paul’s letter to the Romans to Duns Scotus’ questioning of Thomas Aquinas’ ‘position’, having first dealt with Aristotle (LMW 6). In the book, *Responsibility and Judgement* (RJ), published posthumously after *Life of the Mind*, she speaks against traditional beliefs and how these have affected men’s way of thinking regarding good and evil.

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<sup>377</sup> Kant, E. *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, IX.

“According to our tradition, all is accounted for by either human blindness and ignorance or human weakness, the inclination to yield to temptation. Man – so the implied argument runs – is able neither to do good automatically nor to do evil deliberately. He is *tempted* to do evil and he needs an *effort* to do good. So deeply rooted has this notion become – not through the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, but through the doctrines of Christian moral philosophy – that people commonly regard as right what they don't like to do and as wrong whatever tempts them.” (RJ 79)

That is why she speaks against Christian moral philosophy and traditional beliefs that resulted from it when these were erroneously interpreted. The fact that man is tempted to do evil and the fact that he needs an effort to do good is understandable. What she speaks against is, having this so ingrained in oneself that one takes it to the other extreme for “people to commonly regard as right what they don't like to do and as wrong whatever tempts them” (RJ 79). This is what she considers to be wrong and wherein the fault lies. She takes a stand on this and says, “It is, I think, a simple fact that people are at least as often *tempted* to do good and need an *effort* to do evil as vice versa.” (ibid. 80). This is an objective observation of the human condition with which I am in agreement.

Everything that one does and all human actions have a moral dimension. As was seen previously in subsection 2.4.1, according to Arendt, in her years after her book *Love and Saint Augustine*, she will hold that the specific meaning of each deed can lie only in the performance itself and not in its motivation, in why it was done or in its achievement (HC 206). Since we are distinguished by our actions, then we are distinguished by our good or bad actions. In line with what was seen previously, one can also conclude that it is the act itself that can and should be classified to be good or bad.

On a different note, in both *Love and Saint Augustine* and in *Essays in Understanding*, on several occasions, she brings up *good will* and the *common good*, though the latter less often. In relation to these, she says that a ‘man of good will’ is according to Kant ‘a good man’ (EU 441). She also mentions Jaspers’ ‘limitless communication’ which implies faith in the comprehensibility of all truths along with the good will to reveal and to listen, as primary conditions of authentic human being-together (ibid.). Both mentions are made in the same unpublished lecture entitled “Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought” which was originally delivered to the *American Political Science Association* in 1954. In the same article, she brings up Hegel who held that reconciliation of spirit with reality depended entirely on the ability to harmonize and see something good in every evil. Her comment is that this remained valid only as long as radical evil had not happened (ibid. 44). It was no longer possible because radical evil, in as far as Arendt is concerned, is an unforgivable evil as was seen in the sub-section on forgiveness. Hence, there can be no reconciliation of spirit with this reality of radical evil.

When Arendt refers to the ‘common good’ in *The Human Condition*, she explains that it did not refer to the political realm but to private individuals and that it was more of a Christian attitude of spiritual and material interests. The attitude was such that, when attending to private business, one ought to look out for this common good of all others present, past or future as well (HC 35, 55) meaning that it transcended our lifespan into past and future alike (ibid.). This concern for those who lived in a common world changed in modern times and is no longer possible in a world where we have lost the public realm as well as authentic concern with immortality (ibid 35). In other words, when the

conditions in the public and private realm changed, so did men's concern for the common good.

What is interesting to note is that Arendt, when she analyses the nature of good, she almost inevitably makes reference to God, for example as a necessary companion for truly good action, the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and those of his apostle Paul, as well as some of the Saints of the Church such as Augustine as well as Thomas Aquinas. For example, she hails Thomas when she claims that the “old *topos* of philosophy makes more sense in Thomas' than in most other systems because the centre of Thomas' system, its ‘first principle’ is Being.” (LMW 118)<sup>378</sup>

However, with regard to religion itself, in a letter to Jaspers dated March 1951, she claims, “All traditional religion as such, whether Jewish or Christian, holds nothing whatsoever for me anymore.” (AJC 166) Implying that if she cited them or brought them up, it had nothing to do with her personal beliefs. If one were to guess why she cites them given her concern and love for truth, it would not be too far off the mark to say that if she cites or commends them, it is because she held what they said to be true.

On September 19, 1963, Hannah Arendt received a letter from Samuel Grafton, who worked for the *Look* magazine. As mentioned earlier, he sent her a set of 13 questions. In the last question he informs her that in the Jewish circles, there were comments going around that she had been converted to Catholicism. (JW 474) Her remarks to this observation are quite outright, “There is no truth in it whatsoever. I suppose the rumour

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<sup>378</sup> It has been said that Aquinas, “can better account for the dignity of (...) actions because he appreciates that while they may not be tooted in the love of God, they may not be rooted in the vicious love of self or glory either. Arendt's appeal to new beginnings motivated by amor mundi testifies to a similar kind of possibility.” Kiess, J., (2016), *Hannah Arendt and Theology*, pg. 179.

has been started in the old hope—*semper aliquid adhaeret*<sup>379</sup>. (JW 484) It is not altogether clear what she refers to by the Latin phrase, perhaps she means the Christian hope that ‘nothing is ever lost’ or that something of the Catholic teachings or formation she received earlier in life, probably stayed or stuck with her. She refers to the supposed conversion in her answer to his third question by referring to these canards as “pseudo-opinions” of interest groups who feel threatened by “‘independent’ people, who belong to no organization, in order to be able to say: these people, far from being independent speak only in the name of other interests.” (ibid. 478) Her claim that she is speaking independently are another indicator to show that if she cites Catholics or if these coincided with Catholic teachings, it was because she thought them to be true, not because she believed the Catholic faith. She actually out rightly denies any conversion to Catholicism. She goes on to confirm that she considers herself an independent thinker, for which she makes no apologies while at the same time acknowledging that people probably dislike her for her independent thought. If anything, she always declared herself to be a Jew. Hans Jonas in his memoirs says Arendt once told him: “Odd. I can’t imagine a world without Jews. Naturally, if we are Jews, we will always be Jews.”<sup>380</sup> He also quotes her to have said, “I have never doubted in the existence of a personal God.”<sup>381</sup> These are in reference to God but not to her faith.

With regard to her religious belief, Young-Bruehl comments that, “What Hannah Arendt learned while she wrote her dissertation – learned from living, not reading – was that, by birth, she was a Jew.”<sup>382</sup> Being a Jew is

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<sup>379</sup> This generally translates to “something always clings (or sticks)”.

<sup>380</sup> My translation from the Spanish version of Jonas, H., *Memorias*, (2005). Pg. 369-370. Teresa Gutiérrez de Cabiedes relates the same incident in her *El hechizo de la Comprensión*, pg. 343-344.

<sup>381</sup> Jonas, H. (2005), *Memorias*, pg. 370.

<sup>382</sup> Young-Bruehl, E. (1982). *Hannah Arendt, for love of the world*, pg. 76.

what she openly confessed to being, something she suffered for, fought for and something that she never once denied. Not even towards the end of her life.

The claim of Arendt becoming Catholic or Christian could be reinforced by what she says in a conference hosted in November of 1972 on *The Work of Hannah Arendt*, which took place ten years after the above denial;

“I am perfectly sure that this whole totalitarian catastrophe would not have happened if people still had believed in God, or in hell rather – that is, if there still were ultimates. There were no ultimates. And you know as well as I do that there were no ultimates which one could with validity appeal to. One couldn’t appeal to anybody.”<sup>383</sup>

Can this be taken as an admission of her belief in God’s supremacy and existence? I would think so even though it may only be an indirect one. Either way, Arendt’s beliefs are a personal and private matter, which may (or may not) have influenced her thought and perception of good itself as I shall proceed to show. Therefore, it is now in order to deal with where or in which realm the good is and can be practised for it to continue to be classified as good.

#### 5.1.1 Goodness and its sphere

When Arendt talks about goodness she brings up the fact that it “harbours a tendency to hide from being seen or heard” (HC 74). Using the reasoning above about things that are hidden, one would think that therefore goodness is for the private realm. Thus, implying that goodness tends towards remaining hidden from the public. When she

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<sup>383</sup> Arendt, H. (1972). “On Hannah Arendt,” pgs. 313–314.

brought up the concept of goodness in *Love and Saint Augustine*, the realm for Augustine seems to be outside of oneself and must be ‘searched for and desired’ (LSA 31). This is the Christian way of looking at goodness.

According to Arendt’s interpretation of the Christian phenomenon of goodness, she has this to say,

“For it is manifest that the moment a good work becomes known and public, it loses its specific character of goodness, of being done for nothing but goodness’ sake. When goodness appears openly, it is no longer goodness, (...) Goodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author; whoever sees himself performing a good work is no longer good.” (HC 74)

In Arendt’s opinion, this is due to an early Christian tendency “to lead a life as far removed from the public realm as possible” (HC 74). For if goodness appears openly, then there would be no merit and neither could the act be classified as good as it has been seen or made conspicuous which for her is a way of making it known to others (ibid. 75). If this is done then there is no goodness because it would be lost. She thus declares good works to be apolitical in nature when and if interpreted in the Christian way. Good works, ‘because they must be forgotten instantly, can never become part of the world’ and therefore, as cited above, ‘They truly are not of this world.’ If they are not of this world then neither can they be political.

Arendt argues that it is possible to love the world without becoming a part of it when she describes the willing ego which she says, says “*Amo: Volo ut sis*” (LMW 136) which could be translated to, “I love you: I will that you be.” Arendt compares this to “the same love with which

supposedly God loves men, whom He created only because He willed them to exist and whom He *loves without desiring them.*” (LMW 136) With the will, therefore, it is possible to love the world without desiring it.<sup>384</sup>

Arendt is not in full agreement with what she understands to be the Christian interpretation of goodness. Rather, she is of the view that “goodness (and loneliness)<sup>385</sup> are of much greater relevance to politics than wisdom<sup>386</sup> (or solitude)” (HC 76). She also implies that goodness is not contradictory to the human condition of plurality (ibid.). She claims that “when goodness appears openly...it may still be useful as organised charity or an act of solidarity” (ibid.). She concurs with the idea that goodness stands in a certain opposition to the public realm (ibid. 75), and holds that, “love of goodness, unlike love of wisdom, is not restricted to the experience of the few” (ibid.). For Arendt, love of goodness is within the range of every man’s experience.

I would also like to argue that much as good actions do not form part of the world, they are still performed within the world. Let me explain: Arendt attaches an “inherent wordlessness” to good works and explains that “in so far as it is truly the experience of love in the sense of an activity ... like all other activities, does not leave the world, but must be performed within it.” (HC 77). The importance of the performance of actions was seen in sub-section 2.4.1 of this work. Nevertheless, Arendt

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<sup>384</sup> Bowen-Moore gives a more detailed description of this in her book, *Hannah Arendt’s Philosophy of Natality*, pgs. 101-161.

<sup>385</sup> In subsection 1.4 an in-depth description of solitude is given as well as the differentiation between solitude and isolation.

<sup>386</sup> It is interesting to see how she relates and compares goodness with wisdom. Wisdom implies thinking on the part of the philosopher. This thinking is also not visible nor seen. It can be made manifest or can be crystallised into thoughts which can be expressed in words or in speech.

stresses the importance of performing the action itself because for her, “the ‘product’ is identical with the performing act itself” (HC 207). This implies that the goodness of the act is likewise identical with the performance of the good act itself, which in turn are performed within the world much as they do not truly belong to this world. Now, what is interesting is that since a good work is meant for no one, it ought not to be expressed. This in turn would imply that the presence of others is not necessary for an act to be classified as good. In this sense, she would coincide with Augustine’s interpretation that good works are not of this world.

Her point for bringing up the goodness of acts was to present it as an example of “the activities of *vita activa*, whose articulations have been curiously neglected by a tradition which considered it chiefly from the standpoint of the *vita contemplativa*” (HC 76). Arendt is very much against the traditional view<sup>387</sup> and a strong advocate of the *vita active*<sup>388</sup>. She also admits that all she wanted to do was to “try to determine with some measure of assurance their political significance.” (HC 78). In

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<sup>387</sup> In as far as Arendt is concerned, “our great tradition has remained so peculiarly silent, so obviously wanting in productive replies, when challenged by the “moral” and political questions of our own time. The very sources from which such answers should have sprung had dried up. The very framework within which understanding and judging could arise is gone.” (EU 316)

<sup>388</sup> She is not against or in contra of the contemplative life as was seen previously.

other words, good actions are political<sup>389</sup> in nature in as far as Arendt is concerned.

Arendt makes the following interesting observation and advocates the following for lovers of goodness:

“The man, however, who is in love with goodness can never afford to lead a solitary life, and yet his living with others and for others must remain essentially without testimony and lacks first of all the company of himself. He is not solitary, but lonely; when living with others he must hide from them and cannot even trust himself to witness what he is doing. The philosopher can always rely upon his thoughts to keep him company, whereas good deeds can never keep anybody company; they must be forgotten the moment they are done, because even memory will destroy their quality of being ‘good.’” (HC 76)

What is clear is that for her, goodness is a lonely business, reason being that man would have to live a lonely life without testimony. For Arendt, men must live with others, and their presence is a necessary human condition in as far as her concept of plurality is concerned. For her, “loneliness is contradictory to the human condition of life (...)

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<sup>389</sup> Here she brings up Machiavelli who advocated that glory was the appropriate criterion for political acts and not goodness. He also said that badness can no more shine in glory than goodness. Arendt claims that this is similar to classical antiquity, something as we well know, she did not like to use as a reference. (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1952, Ch. 15) Arendt’s reaction to Machiavelli is that, he was arguing for religion to be a private affair going so far as to claim “Don’t let those people into politics! They don’t care enough for the world! People believe that the world is mortal and they themselves immortal, are very dangerous characters because we want the stability and good order of this world.” (Arendt, H. (1972). “On Hannah Arendt,” pg. 311)

unbearable for any length of time and needs the company of God, the only imaginable witness of good works.” (HC 76). Arendt maintains her stand on this even in later writings as can be evidenced from what she says below;

“in the sense of which we spoke before about solitude, the man who has fallen in love with doing good has embarked upon the most lonely career there can be for man, except if he happens to believe in God, to have God for company and testimony.” (RJ 117)

Later in 1972 at the conference *The Work of Hannah Arendt* mentioned earlier, she is quoted to have said,

“This business with goodness was not brought up by me but by Machiavelli<sup>390</sup>. It has something to do with the distinction between the public and the private. But I can put it differently. I would say that in the notion of wanting to be good, I actually am concerned with own self. The moment I act politically I’m not concerned with me, but with the world. And that is the main distinction.”<sup>391</sup>

What she claims is that the decisive thing is whether your own motivation is clearly for the world or for yourself (by which she means for your soul as she states further on in the above citation)<sup>392</sup>. Love and concern for the world are critical for Arendt as was seen in Subsection 1.3.2 and later in Subsection 2.2. There it was seen that man is inevitably drawn to the world and that for authentic political action, man must be concerned about the world as has also been cited above. A man truly concerned about the world *will* perform good works.

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<sup>390</sup> Refer to previous footnote.

<sup>391</sup> Arendt H., (1972). “On Hannah Arendt,” pgs. 310–311.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

In *The Human Condition* she says, “Crime and willed evil are rare, even rarer perhaps than good deeds” (HC 240). This would mean that the primary tendency of man would be towards good actions rather than willed evil. This does not rule out the fact that we do commit evil nor that we are capable of it. In this regard she raises an interesting discussion on forgiving evil which can only be done out of love, not to mention the fact that forgiveness in and of itself is a good act. She dedicates the whole of Section 34 of *The Human Condition* to explain how this is done. An in-depth discussion on this was held in sub-section 2.4. Basically, forgiveness provides a perspective of evil that one could say is necessary given that it changes the course of action for the good. Change is possible because of natality and since natality is central to action, then natality is also central to good action.

#### 5.1.2 Natality, plurality and doing good

Forgiveness, like promise, has a power of its own as was seen earlier in section 2.4 of this work. Both forgiveness and promise have a moral character and are closely associated to good acts. Forgiveness serves as a corrective remedy for action implying that through forgiveness, the course of action is changed. This in turn implies that what was wrong can be ‘made’ right. The fact that the course of action is changed, is an indication of some kind of power or aforementioned sovereignty that men can exercise over action. Arendt describes forgiveness as a “possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility” of action (HC 237) or the ability to “undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing” (ibid.). Or put differently, one could say that forgiveness gives men a chance to begin again without being condemned by the action for which one has been forgiven. The effect of this change is a kind of ‘mutual release’ for men which helps them to ‘remain free agents’ (HC 240). The feeling of

release is due to the renewed chance they are given through forgiveness to ‘start again’ and ‘begin something anew’ (ibid.) or making it right, thereby releasing them of what had been done previously and of which they have been forgiven (ibid. 237). The human condition related to beginning again is natality as seen in chapter 1 and in subsections 2.4.

Without the possibility of being forgiven, men would be “confined to one single deed from which we could never recover” (HC 237) remaining “victims of its consequences forever” (ibid.). Previously, it was seen that radical evil is incomprehensible and could not be forgiven.<sup>393</sup> It was also seen that the Christian concept of forgiveness claims that all evil no matter how radical, men must forgive men “for they know not what they do” (HC 239). It was in this that she accuses Jesus’ formulation of forgiveness to be radical (ibid.). In as far as Arendt was concerned, the incomprehensible is unforgivable, as was seen in her 1951 letter to Jaspers. This was her prior stand.

Then, in *The Human Condition*, she reasons it out differently as her focal point is the moral code inferred from the faculty of forgiveness, which rests on the fact that it is an experience which nobody could ever have with himself (HC 238). As was seen, forgiveness depends on plurality, “on the presence and acting of others, for no one can forgive himself” (ibid.). This also implies that forgiveness is of a political nature<sup>394</sup>. Consequently, Arendt claims that,

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<sup>393</sup> Refer to subsection 2.4.3.

<sup>394</sup> In her explanation and as was noted previously in Chapter 2 of this work, Arendt is of the view that the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was the ‘discoverer of the role of forgiveness’ (HC 238) is no reason to disregard it or “take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense” (ibid.). She goes on to expound this teaching highlighting that Jesus taught that men must first forgive each other before they can hope to be forgiven by God (ibid., 239).

“The moral code, (...), inferred from the faculties of forgiving and of making promises, rests on experiences which nobody could ever have with himself, which, on the contrary, are entirely based on the presence of others. And just as the extent and modes of self-rule justify and determine rule over others – how one rules himself, he will rule others – thus the extent and modes of being forgiven and being promised determine the extent and modes in which one may be able to forgive himself or keep promises concerned only with himself.” (HC 238)

Arendt explains that since these remedies “function only under the condition of plurality, it is very dangerous to use this faculty in any but the realm of human affairs.” (HC 238). In her opinion, men have tried to transfer this remedy of attempting to undo what has been done, by taking it outside of the human realm and applying it to the natural realm as is done in modern natural science and technology. When one tackles with the natural realm, one is interfering with necessary conditions given to man to *be* man. In the natural realm, “no remedy can be found to undo what has been done” (HC 238) except by means of destruction.

“Nothing appears more manifest in these attempts than the greatness of human power, whose source lies in the capacity to act, and which without action's inherent remedies inevitably begins to overpower and destroy not man himself but the conditions under which life was given to him.” (HC 238)

In an attempt to undo actions carried out within the natural realm as opposed to the human realm, the human remedy, inherent in human action is not applicable. What Arendt says, therefore is that, destruction in the natural realm eventually leads to self-destruction. What she also implies, is that the unforgivable is actually forgivable but only in the human realm.

Arendt explains that the moral precepts of forgiveness and making promises arise “directly out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking” (HC 246). This, according to Arendtian thinking can be interpreted to mean that they arise out of concern for the world. If there is concern for the world then there can be authentic political action. This is another reason that justifies that these precepts are political in nature. That is why she says,

“without the faculty to undo what we have done and to control at least partially the processes we have let loose, we would be the victims of an automatic necessity bearing all the marks of the inexorable laws which, (...), were supposed to constitute the outstanding characteristic of natural processes.” (HC 246)

Hence, forgiveness, much as it is a good moral act, is a duty and is necessary for people living in community otherwise, we would be caught up in an inescapable cycle. To comply with this, one has to be willing to change their mind and to begin again as well as be concerned for the world.

As pointed out earlier, forgiveness does not apply to “the extremity of crime and willed evil” (HC 239) because in her interpretation of Jesus’ teaching, forgiveness is a duty since they know not what they do<sup>395</sup>. Since ‘they know not what they do’ then the others have the duty to forgive them. This, according to Arendt’s explanation, implies that if on the other hand, it is known what you do or actually will evil, then there is no duty to forgive. This has vast implications that are out of the scope of this work. In any case, in her opinion, extremity of crime and willed evil are rare (HC 240) such that for her, these are unforgivable acts. In Chapter 2 it was seen that they are also the same acts that cannot be

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid. She goes on to justify her interpretation by quoting Luke 17:3-4, Matthew 16:27 and Luke 17:1-5 of the bible.

punished. They are the ones that were described as “radical evil” acts. It was also seen that such acts “transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power” because precisely, they destroy them (human affairs and human power) (ibid. 241).

It was also seen that “Forgiving and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (...) affair in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it.” (HC 241). If one were to interpret this in terms of good and evil then one would say, the evil that was done is forgiven for the sake of the evildoer. Forgiving itself is a good act. According to Arendt, forgiveness is possible because of love and because of respect (ibid. 242-243). Love is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be (ibid. 242). In the same manner she concludes that “Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.” (ibid.). Its force is such that, by its passion, it “possesses an unequalled power of self-revelation”, “clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*” as well as having the power to “destroy the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others” by reason of its passion (ibid.). Consequently, one may conclude, where there is no love, there is no plurality.

It also implies that forgiveness has the inherent quality of plurality.<sup>396</sup> The other thing seen was the fact that it is not “only love has the power to forgive” (HC 242) but respect as well because “it concerns only the person” and because in action and speech, “we are dependent upon others” (HC 243) thus we cannot forgive ourselves (ibid.). She defines respect to be “a regard for the person from the distance which the space

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<sup>396</sup> This was also seen previously in this work in Chapter 2 on Political Action, subsections 2.5.2 and 2.5.3.

of the world puts between us, and this regard is independent of qualities which we may admire or of achievements which we may highly esteem” (ibid.). Since it concerns only the person, respect is sufficient to prompt forgiveness of what a person did, for the sake of the person. (ibid.) This is the same when it comes to love – it concerns only the person. Arendt comments that the “modern loss of respect, or rather the conviction that respect is due only where we admire or esteem, constitutes a clear symptom of the increasing depersonalisation of public and social life.” (HC 243) A loss of respect would in turn mean less forgiveness and consequently less good done in, by and for society.

This is why natality and beginning again are so vital. Allow me to explain. Since life is the highest good, as identified in her book *The Human Condition*, where she says, “For what matters today is not the immortality of life, but that life is the highest good.” (HC 319), then in order to preserve and attain this good, one has to be able to begin a new action especially if the act is a good act such as forgiveness. Likewise, one may consequently conclude that where there is no natality, there can be no forgiveness. Natality is necessary to break the cycle. One may also conclude that in order to attain good, one must do good.

## 5.2 Political good

As Arendt matured in her understanding of evil and good, so did her way of relating the good, action and politics. In the 1940s she says,

“When out of fear you twist the lesser evil into the lie that it is something good, you eventually rob people of the capacity to differentiate between good and evil. But you can't pursue politics with people who are accustomed to accepting evil instead of resisting it – even if that is under the pretence of avoiding a greater evil” (JW 166)

Basically, she highlights the importance of being able to distinguish between good and evil as was tackled in Chapter 4. She also advocates for truth-telling in politics as was also seen in the same chapter.

Ten to fifteen years later in *The Human Condition*, she confines herself “to an analysis of those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed” (HC 6) placing special emphasis on the capacity of action. She explains that action, corresponds to plurality as the basic condition under which life on earth has been given to man. (ibid. 7) This in turn, is “intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality” (ibid. 8). One may relate mortality to the condition of man as a temporal being<sup>397</sup>. All three of these, plurality, natality and mortality, are key in understanding good and evil as political and moral action. She argues this by analysing the consequences of their negation.<sup>398</sup>

First, this negation needs to be put in context. According to Arendt, “politically, the modern world, in which we live today, was born with the first atomic explosions” (HC 6) as a result of which there has been a twofold response. This is either: “flight from the earth into the universe” (HC 6), a reaction that results in a desire to try to dominate the world or; “from the world into the self, to its origins” (ibid.) which in turn is a retreat into fantasy. This was discussed in Section 3.1 and 3.2. The aim of either flight, as was seen in these sections was, she says, “in order to

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<sup>397</sup> This important factor is related to the human condition and beginning action was covered at the end of Chapter 2.

<sup>398</sup> In sub-section 1.5 of this work, this was seen in detail. A fuller analysis of this is in her book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she explains what happens when men negate human plurality as interpersonal, insisting that for man “to act is to act-in-concert” (HC 123; TOT 474; LMW, 201).

arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age.” (HC, 6) The nature of society had changed with a possibility of mass human destruction and capable of evil on such a grand scale not known of before. Men had to deal with this unfathomable evil somehow and hence these reactions.

Considering the first reaction of ‘desire to dominate’ implies that power would either have to be shared by a few or taken over by one individual. The use of power implies action and all action implies a new beginning due to natality. But action is unpredictable, the human person easily loses control over actions that he initiated and because action has no end. (HC 232-233) As a consequence of this ‘loss of control’ over action, one may be tempted to think it best not to act at all. Arendt writes that using such logic, “The only salvation from this kind of freedom seems to lie in non-acting, in abstention from the whole realm of human affairs as the only means to safeguard one's sovereignty and integrity as a person.” (ibid. 234) However, less action results in a lower probability of doing good and consequently in less concern for the world.

Nevertheless, such reasoning easily results in the risk of equating the capacity for action to the capacity of freedom.<sup>399</sup> Kampowski agrees with this interpretation saying that the error lies in thinking that “the degree of freedom is proportionate to one's degree of self-sufficiency and control”<sup>400</sup>. Arendt explains the moral consequences that this has,

“They (men) have known that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no

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<sup>399</sup> Refer to subsection 2.5 for a detailed explanation on political freedom and action.

<sup>400</sup> Kampowski, S. (2008) *Arendt, Augustine, and the New Beginning*, pg. 216.

matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and that its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian who himself does not act<sup>401</sup>.” (HC 233)

The main point of interest here, is that the morality of an act is as unpredictable as action itself due to its property of natality. As was seen, natality is a beginning and beginning again which implies novelty (HC 178). The other idea that she explains in the quote above is the fact that men ‘never quite know what they are doing’ and so become guilty of what was ‘never intended or even foreseen’. As had been seen earlier, action, due to its natality, is unpredictable and starts a process that is irreversible (ibid. 220). This raises another ‘problem’ or ‘inconvenience’ with action, which is the anonymity of the authors (ibid.) meaning that one can never really know the true originator of the act nor the final executor. All these, from the moral point of view, can be quite frustrating as it is the agent who would ideally end up “being guilty” of a crime that they actually did not (directly) commit nor had any intention of committing. If you don’t ‘quite know’ what you are doing, how can you take responsibility? How can you not feel guilty of some immoral or unpleasant act of which you could actually claim that you in some way set off? For example, is a father justified in taking the guilt of the death of his son because he bought him a car and the son died in a car accident? This would mean that we would have to take the moral responsibility for practically all acts performed<sup>402</sup>. A typical response to

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<sup>401</sup> The fact that points out the historian as the rightful spectator or truth-teller for that matter, is consistent with her idea that only an outsider, removed from the actual event is in the best position to understand and judge an act, and not the actor himself.

<sup>402</sup> In her article entitled “Organised Guilt and Universal Responsibility”, published in *Jewish Frontier*, No. 12, 1945, or as “German Guilt” (EU 121-132), she gives this an

this, as was seen, would be to want to run away from it all or to dominate the situation by dominating the action from beginning to end.

By the mid 1960s when Arendt writes “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy”, she gives deeper and more mature analyses of the relation between doing good and acting. For example, she writes that “Reason can only tell the will: this is good, in accordance with reason; if you wish to attain it you ought to act accordingly” (RJ 71). Here she acknowledges the importance of reason and thought in relation to action. Reason identifies the good and in order to attain it, you act accordingly. You do good because you want to do it.

By the time she writes her last book, *Life of the Mind*, she will still hold that, as mentioned previously, “most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.” (LMT 180). In other words, she again affirms the role that thought, reason and will have in assuring action and good action at that. She also cautions that “Everybody may come to shun that intercourse with oneself whose feasibility and importance Socrates first discovered.” (LMT 191) This intercourse with oneself is what is necessary to do good and to avoid evil and is also “political by implication” (ibid. 192). When men do not think, she claims, “unexamined opinions” regarding “values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions” are destroyed which in turn affects judgement. (ibid.) She differentiates judging from thinking. Judging is the manifestation of thought (different from mere knowledge) and thus an “ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (HC 193). She concludes this section of her book by making the claim that

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in-depth consideration. Prior Olmos explica que, para Arendt, “No puede haber culpabilidad vicarial, sí responsabilidad vicaria, esto es, responsabilidad por cosas que uno mismo no ha hecho y que le pueden imputar.” (Prior Olmos, Á., (2009). *Voluntad y responsabilidad en Hannah Arendt*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, pg. 49)

“judgements are not arrived at by either deduction or induction” and “have nothing in common with logical operations” (LMT 215). Rather,

“In practical and moral matters, it was called ‘conscience,’ and conscience did not judge; it told you, as the divine voice of either God or reason, what to do, what not to do, and what to repent of. Whatever the voice of conscience may be, it cannot be ‘silent,’ and its validity depends entirely upon an authority that is above and beyond merely human laws and rules.” (LMT 215)

Despite the above definition, Arendt holds that people are “commonly still lacking in judgment” (LMT 215) even among learned men. Her claim is that modern thought is haunted by a whole set of problems, one of which is the attempt to “arrive at a halfway plausible theory of ethics.” (LMT 216)

### 5.2.1 Doing good today

Arendt in her final writings, expresses a deep concern for the world today. She seems to imply that it is necessary for man to understand the world so that it can be loved for if it is loved, there will be concern for it and if there is concern, then good will be the preferred choice above evil.<sup>403</sup> This could explain her dire need to comprehend how it is possible that people choose to do evil. She offers a possible explanation in *The Life of the Mind*,

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<sup>403</sup> Bárcena explains that, “Everything that she says and writes is tied to a struggle against reductionism; against the reduction of what is political to technical and scientific rationality, against its reduction to whichever kind of philosophic idealism, and against its moralistic reduction.” (My translation from Bárcena, F. (2006). *Hannah Arendt: una filosofía de la natalidad*, Herder, pg. 145.)

“Evil is either denied true reality (it exists only as a deficient mode of the good) or is explained away as a kind of optical illusion (the fault is with our limited intellect, which fails to fit some particular properly into the encompassing whole that would justify it), all is on the unargued assumption that ‘only the whole is actually real’ (*‘nur das Ganze hat eigentliche Wirklichkeit’*), in the words of Hegel.” (LMW 34)

Again, she blames man himself since he has all the necessary conditions to perceive evil and good. In other words, it could be blamed on the fact that he is free.

When she cites Augustine’s *Confessions* and his leading question into the cause of evil, she quotes him to say; “for evil could not have come into being without a cause” and God cannot be the cause of evil because “God is good” (LMW 87). She explains it using his reasoning which is that God made us and God gave us free will. We are able to do evil because we have free will but in this way; “God may appear to be the cause of our evil deeds.” (LMW 87) Later she agrees with Augustine that God could not have created evil because that would imply that he had created nothingness which is impossible since it is contradictory to create nothingness. What she maintains here is that freedom is a key human condition when it comes to doing evil and/or good. How this is so, was covered in Chapter 2 of this work. She also maintains that man is solely responsible and not God.

If the intention is bad, then the outcome could not be good. This last point could be backed up basing on an unpublished essay entitled *The Eggs speak up*, which was marked “Circa 1950” (EU 270). There Arendt writes, “Each good action, even for a ‘bad cause,’ adds some real goodness to the world; each bad action even for the most beautiful of all ideals makes our common world a little worse.” (EU 281) In other words, actions affect the world according to their nature. Bad actions

will affect it negatively and good actions will have a positive effect. Therefore, good actions result in a better world. In the same way, Kristeva reminds us that, “In the political space of appearances and of sharing with other people, to think about the good is not to do good.”<sup>404</sup>

Arendt pondered Augustine’s interrogation on this and ends up agreeing with him. His answer came much later in the *City of God* when he analyses the purpose of the will. He brings up the “*Non hoc est velle quod posse*,” “to will and to be able are not the same” (LMW 118-119). She admits that the two faculties, willing and performing, are closely related and concludes with Augustine that, “the mind is not moved until it wills to be moved” because “only the Will, and neither reason nor the appetites and desires, is ‘in our power; it is free.’”<sup>405</sup>

Arendt’s analysis is that, “being alive always implies a wish to go on being” (LMW 91). She goes on to cite Augustine to say “‘all things by the very fact that they are good,’ evil and sin included; and this not only because of their divine origin and because of a belief in a Creator-God, but also because your own existence prevents you from either thinking or willing absolute non-existence.” (LMW 91) Unfortunately, Arendt does not give her own personal opinion on this Augustinian interpretation. However, at the end of her chapter on his philosophy of the Will, she says,

“Every man being created in the singular, is a new beginning by virtue of his birth; if Augustine had drawn the consequences of these speculations, he would have defined men, not, like the Greeks, as mortals, but as ‘natales,’ and he would have defined the freedom of the Will not as the *liberum*

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<sup>404</sup> Kristeva, J. (2001) *Hannah Arendt*, pg. 153.

<sup>405</sup> Arendt’s references to these citations are *Epistolae*, 177, 5 and *On Free Choice of the Will*, bk. III, chap. i, 8-10 and chap. Iii, 33. (LMW 88).

*arbitrium*, the free choice between willing and nilling, but as the freedom of which Kant speaks in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.” (LMW 109)

In other words, she brings up the human condition of natality and relates it to Kant’s interpretation and understanding of freedom as opposed to Augustine’s interpretation. She is of the view,

“(H)ad Kant known of Augustine’s philosophy of natality he might have agreed that the freedom of a *relatively* absolute spontaneity is no more embarrassing to human reason than the fact that men are *born*-newcomers again and again in a world that preceded them in time. The freedom of spontaneity is part and parcel of the human condition. Its mental organ is the Will.” (LMW 110)

What she is implying is that Kant and Augustine would not have contradicted<sup>406</sup> themselves on this point of freedom of spontaneity. By implying this, she further implies that neither of them would have contradicted her own theory and understanding of natality.

Arendt will also study Duns Scotus in her last book, and what he has to say on the will regarding man’s natural inclination toward the good and the fact that he explains evil will as human weakness. (LMW 132) What she finds interesting about Scotus, basing on Kantian<sup>407</sup> reasoning, is his conclusion that “absolute nothingness cannot be found in thought” (LMW 146). This is important because basing on this very conclusion she will draw her own conclusion regarding nothingness, evil and good. The relation between these three is precisely what spurred this study and

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<sup>406</sup> Interestingly, she makes a similar observation in which she claims that Augustine’s philosophy of the will must have been framed from Paul’s letter to the Romans. (LMW 87)

<sup>407</sup> She cites from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, B643-B645.

it is precisely what I shall delve into at this point.

### 5.3 Radical Good

In earlier times, before the Eichmann trial, starting especially from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and later, Arendt refers to radical evil. How and in what context she does so, as well as her evolution of its meaning was expounded in section 3.2 of this work. In the 1950s, Arendt makes reference to the radical good as opposed to radical evil. In an entry that she made in her *Denktagebuch* dated 23<sup>rd</sup> of April in 1953, she explicitly brings up the concept of radical good when she states, “There is radical evil, but not radical good.”<sup>408</sup> Her thinking at this initial stage therefore is that there is no radical good.

However, on an ontological level, in her reading of Augustine, it was seen in chapter 3 that radical evil cannot really exist meaning that it is not a reality in itself. This would imply that evil is ontologically a non-being. This is not contradictory as the concept is being seen from two different levels. In this context, what Arendt means is that radical evil has no root as was elaborately shown. For Arendt, it also rules out the argument that man is evil by nature as Kant proposed. Rather, the explanation for her use of the word radical is as has been implied so far. This is her implication that the term radical refers to the root as motive and/or intention.<sup>409</sup> Hence, at this stage as cited above, for Arendt, there is no radical good but radical evil.

In later years, more specifically after her report on the Eichmann trial, having given the concept of radical evil more thought and after having studied it more, she turns to radical good because her position on this,

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<sup>408</sup> *Denktagebuch*, Heft XIV, April 1953, [32] pg. 341.

<sup>409</sup> Refer to section 3.2 of this work for detailed explanation.

changes. It is made manifest ten years later in one of her letters written as a reply to Gershom's dated June 1963. In it, Arendt explicitly admits that she has changed her mind regarding the existence of radical good. Her reply is dated July 1963. She says,

“You are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of ‘radical evil.’ (...) It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never ‘radical,’ that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is ‘thought defying,’ as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its ‘banality.’ Only the good has depth and can be radical.” (JP 250-251)<sup>410</sup>

This is contradictory to what she had said in 1953. Arendt admits this and explains why she has changed her mind regarding the existence of radical evil. She is of the view that evil can be extreme but not radical due to its lack of depth. Above she says that radical evil “is ‘thought defying,’ because ‘thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because *there is nothing.*’ This is not the case with thinking because, “thinking and remembering (...) is the human way of striking roots” (RJ 100).

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<sup>410</sup> The original text reads: “Sie haben vollkommen Recht, I changed my mind und spreche nicht mehr vom radikal Bösen (...). Ich bin in der Tat heute der Meinung, dass das Böse immer nur extrem ist, aber niemals radikal, es hat keine Tiefe, auch keine Dämonie. Es kann die ganze Welt verwüsten, gerade weil es wie ein Pilz an der Oberfläche weiterwuchert. Tief aber und radikal ist immer nur das Gute.” From an exchange of letters between Gershom Scholem and Arendt. These appeared in *MB Tel Aviv*, 16 August 1963: 3-4; *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 19 October 1963; *Aufbau*, 20 December 1963; and *Encounter*, January 1964: 51-56.

If there is nothing that the mind has to work with, to think about or to judge, then it won't and can't function. Complete absence of good means non-existence as has already been mentioned. This is in line with Arendt's appreciation for the need for essence and existence to coincide. If there is no good there is nothing, if there is nothing for the mind to work with, no root of any sort, then there is no reference or way in which one can think about it. This is what puts it in a category that is beyond comprehension making it incomprehensible – because it defies thought.

Arendt says evil if radical, is non-existent and seems to imply that it can only be extreme. Extreme means that it still has a touch of good because it is not 'radically'<sup>411</sup> evil. Complete absence of evil would mean non-existence. Its existence therefore depends on the presence of good. Arendt does not change this view with the passing of years.

The above quotation from Gershom's letter dates back to 1963. In her final work, *Life of the Mind*, which was written in 1975, over ten years later, her position on this has not changed regarding radical evil. She writes,

“Ugliness and evil are almost by definition excluded from the thinking concern. They may turn up as deficiencies, ugliness consisting in lack of beauty, evil, *kakia*, in lack of the good. As such, they have no roots of their own, no essence that thought could get hold of.” (LMT 179)

Notice that above, Arendt says evil is *almost* excluded. I would explain this by noting that she refers to evil and not radical evil. If something is merely evil or ugly, it lacks some good but not complete good, meaning

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<sup>411</sup> Implied in the Kantian sense of having a root.

there is at least a trace of some good left thereby justifying its existence so to speak. This cannot be the case for radical evil as this would imply complete absence of good, which as noted previously would in turn imply non-existence. All this is consistent with what she had written to Gershom and does not contradict it.

Arendt's change of mind seems to have occurred shortly after her report on the Eichmann trial.<sup>412</sup> It is highly likely that it was a result of the amount of thought she gave to the banality of evil and her use of the expression due to the uproar that was caused after her report. As was seen, much as the concepts of radical evil and banality of evil are independent, they are also highly and directly complementary.<sup>413</sup> Thus, her understanding and reflection of the banality of evil gave rise to her change of the existence of the concept of radical evil.

Ensuing years and maturity as well as persistent efforts made to try to understand the nature of evil, Arendt eventually understood radical evil differently. Some of this change and evolution of her understanding of the concept of radical evil was seen in section 3.2. There it was seen that, for Arendt, if a philosophical reflection on the nature of evil is done, then ontologically, "absolute or radical evil cannot exist" (LMW 118). The reasoning used was that complete absence of good would be non-Being. This was held by both Aquinas and Aristotle, and Arendt bases her arguments on their reasoning though in a slightly different way. She admits that radical good can exist and is actually a metaphysical reality. However, Arendt did not work at the level of metaphysics and fundamental ontology as was also seen. Instead, basing

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<sup>412</sup> Lasaga, M. J. seems to be of the same mind. He comments on this in his article. (Lasaga, M. J. (2004) "El modelo antropológico de Hannah Arendt La Condición del animal humano." In *Anuario Filosófico*, 151-200, pg. 141)

<sup>413</sup> Refer to subsection 3.4.

on the analysis of the case of Eichmann, she relates thoughtlessness to radical evil and is drawn by this to the importance of thinking and willing both of which she wrote about extensively in her final work.

It is also interesting to note, when Arendt brings up radical good, that her understanding of it is principally in relation to radical evil. She explains under what conditions the two come up;

“Radical evil exists but not radical good. Radical evil always arises, when a radical good is desired. Good and evil can only exist in relations among men; ‘Radicality’ destroys relativity and with it, relations themselves. Radical evil is that which is wanted independently of people and the relations existing between them.”<sup>414</sup>

First condition she claims, is the desire for a radical good. This makes sense using the reasoning above, where it was said; if something is merely evil, it lacks some good but not complete good, meaning there is at least a trace of some good left. The same reasoning applies to good; if something is merely good and not absolutely so, it lacks some evil but not complete evil, meaning that there is at least a trace of some evil left. The difference here is that absolute good exists. Good does not need the evil. This is also consistent with what Arendt says about goodness as seen in subsection 5.1.1. However, if it is absolutely good, and there is no trace of evil, then it must remain hidden from the public (HC 74). This is apolitical. Therefore, following the reasoning of the citation

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<sup>414</sup> Original German text reads: “Es gibt das radikal Böse, aber nicht das radikal Gute. Das radikal Böse entsteht immer, wenn ein radikal Gutes gewollt wird. Gutes und Böses kann es unter Menschen nur in Relationen geben; die “Radikalität” zerstört Relativität und damit die Relationen selbst. Das radikal Böse ist Jegliches, was unabhängig von Menschen und den zwischen ihnen bestehenden Relationen gewollt wird.” (*Denktagebuch*, Heft XIV, April 1953, [32] pg. 341)

above, if we desire a radical good<sup>415</sup>, relations are destroyed and radical evil arises.

The second condition is that radical good can only arise among men. This is the condition of plurality. When either or both good and evil are radical, relations are destroyed. Therefore, provided that there are men, radical good can arise. Arendt also notes that radical evil, on the other hand, is wanted independently of people. This is against the condition of plurality and is in itself apolitical.

Though not mentioned in the above citation, in *The Life of the Mind*, published nearly twenty years after the 1953 notation in her *Denktagebuch*, Arendt notes that thought is a necessary condition for one to be able to do good (LMT 71)<sup>416</sup> and to prevent evil<sup>417</sup>. In other words, to do good, one has to think and will to do good. Doing good and willing good are characteristically Arendtian in nature as they are part of the *vita activa*<sup>418</sup>. To put it differently, for Arendt, the motive of good will is love of the world and the motive for human action is always the good. Consequently, based on these two premises, the motive for human

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<sup>415</sup> What is good, according to Socrates, is what men desire. He said men love and/or desire what they don't have. Refer to subsection 2.4.1 for a more detailed explanation.

<sup>416</sup> Also refer to subsection 4.2 of this work.

<sup>417</sup> Arendt explains that Socrates holds that the connection between evil and lack of thought is that those who 'do philosophy' or those who think, would be incapable of doing evil. Arendt is in favour of this premise. Previously in section 3.2 it was the motive that was radically evil. This is not contradictory because motive is not thought. She herself explains, "The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge; it is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And this, (...), may indeed prevent catastrophes, at least for the self." (LMT 193)

<sup>418</sup> Which in turn takes us back to the very beginning of this work to chapter 1 where the concept of the *vita activa* was addressed in detail.

action is love of the world. The motive, in turn, depends on the individual.<sup>419</sup>

The point here is that when men act, they love the world because they will to do good. To will excessively is destructive of relations between men and to destroy these relations is to destroy plurality, a human condition by which men are able to be human. The human condition of natality is also destroyed when men are not allowed to begin something new due to radical desires which leave no room for change of anything else other than that which is desired.

All in all, as opposed to her prior ideas, Arendt ends up with the notion that radical evil cannot possibly exist because of its dependence on the good, without which, it cannot *be*. It is the good, therefore that is the determining factor. Good can stand on its own but evil cannot. Basically, what is at the centre of her political theory from the point of view of the human condition in relation to her theory of action and her moral thought is none other than the good. This finally explains and answers the question, Why does Arendt say that only good is radical?, that was posed at the outset of this work.

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<sup>419</sup> For she claims, "Morality concerns the individual in his singularity. The criterion of right and wrong, the answer to the question, what ought I to do? depends in the last analysis neither on habits and customs, which I share with those around me, nor on a command of either divine or human origin, but on what I decide with regard to myself." (RJ)



## Conclusions

As was mentioned in the introduction of this work, the intention of this study was to analyse how Hannah Arendt derives the concepts of good and truth, how they play a central role in her philosophy and why she thought that only good can be radical. To start me off, four questions were posed which proved to serve as useful guides in my research journey. It was possible to answer them and, in the process, come up with several other interesting results of which the most outstanding and relevant ones are outlined below.

The first of these questions that was posed, was an inquiry into the possibility of Arendt's ethics without metaphysics and how feasible this was. The conclusions that were drawn in relation to this are the following:

1. Arendt begins many of her arguments based on the ideas and teachings of Socrates, Aristotle, Thomas and Augustine. In this sense, she is actually never quite far from traditional philosophical principles. Consequently, Arendt's method is not entirely without metaphysics since her point of departure is based on the first metaphysical principles as held by them. For

example, like Thomas, the ‘first principle’ at the centre of the system of philosophy is Being (LMW 118). Or when she says, “No being, insofar as it is, can be said to be evil, but only insofar as it lacks Being” (LMW 118) or Augustine’s idea of man as a beginner (*initium*), quoting from his “*initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit*” in practically all her books. Arendt differed from Augustine’s interpretation of loving the world, because for her, by loving the world, one makes themselves part of the world by acting in it.

2. At the very beginning of her work, in *Love and Saint Augustine*, she identifies love (*caritas*) as what links one to one’s neighbour (LSA 93) and with Augustine agrees that *caritas* is the root of all good (ibid., 17). These two theses continue to run parallel throughout her dissertation. We get glimpses of this all through her writings in later years until her last book, where reference is again made to *caritas* being at the root of all good. This idea, that was present at the very beginning, is key and resulted in her final conclusion in relation to the radical good.
3. Arendt uses anthropological and ethical categories as opposed to traditional philosophical methods. The ones that were focused on in this work and that proved to be the valid ones under the given research topic principally include love of the world, plurality, natality and action. To arrive at them, she proceeds from a level of abstraction which invalidates all cultural, historical and social differences. The term she uses for them is ‘human condition’. These anthropological categories served to explain historical events and phenomena in a philosophical manner, where the traditional means had proven to be unable. Mainly, she is able to

provide an explanation as to how and why radical evil was made possible.

4. Proof of the efficacy of her methods is the fact that when the human conditions are tampered with or were altered, men ceased to be human, in fact, they were destroyed (TOT 452). Tampering with the given human condition meant tampering with the very essence of what makes men human beings. This is why her claim that destruction in the natural realm such as making men superfluous, eventually leads to self-destruction (HC 238), is valid.
5. Arendt's well-established ideas continued to be the same both at the outset of her philosophical journey as at the end when she was now a fully-fledged political theorist. Her ideas remained consistent and were consistently applied all throughout her work.
6. On a negative note, Arendt's thought is specific to context. Her reasoning is deductive from one particular case. One may argue against this and imply that one case should not be generalised to all cases at all times. I too agree to this reasoning, though I must say that Arendt herself does not pretend to answer all the world's unanswered questions with her political theories. Admittedly though, her theories were applicable to any given case.

The second research question that served as a guide to this research was a query into what was at the heart of Hannah Arendt political thought. Was she merely reacting to Europe's political and social crises of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century or does her thinking provide consistent answers?

1. At the heart of her political action theory, one is able to discern true concern and love for the world. Her love for the world proved to be the driving force that was at the root of her philosophical theories. Arendt claims that love is apolitical. This is because, by its very nature, it is unworldly thereby making it not only apolitical but antipolitical as well. She goes on to describe love to be “perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces” (HC 242). Nevertheless, and paradoxically so, she herself was drawn to act politically because of love. Love, by reason of its passion, drove her to act politically. Its force or passion were sufficient enough for her to be able to break out on her own and let go of the ‘traditional bannister’ of thought that everyone was holding on to.
2. It was shown that if there is care and concern for the world, then one is forced to act in accordance with this care, hence Arendt’s emphasis on the *vita activa*. Arendt herself personally actively intervened in politics by acting in a public space when she became involved in Zionist discussions and activities, writing for *Aufbau*, and acting as Executive director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction. She also lectured which is pure action and consequently actualisation through action. All these serve as proof of her active intervention in politics. She did these because she cared for the world. In like manner, her reaction to the uproar caused by her report on the Eichmann trial was an action.
3. For Arendt, reconciliation is the whole point of understanding. As stated in her *Denktagebuch*, to try to be reconciled with disharmony in the world, is to affirm one’s solidarity with the world as it is and is, therefore, to help bring into being a common world. She tried to reconcile how radical evil is possible, the

rejection she had face because of her report on the Eichmann trial, she had to reconcile Eichmann the man to his deeds, and she had to reconcile evil to thoughtlessness. Her effort to understand so as to be able to reconcile herself with the world are proof of her concern and love of the world.

4. One may argue that if these problems had never come up, or if Arendt had lived in other times, she would never have defended nor loved the truth as she did. However, if these problems had not come up, neither would there be a need to be reconciled with the world as she would already be in harmony with it. Being in harmony with the world, does not mean that one loves the world less. The truths that she defended would continue to exist and since truth does not change, it would have been the same truth that she would have defended. Hence the proposal that Arendt's political thought was merely a reaction to the European political and social crisis is not valid. Rather, it was her way of seeking reconciliation with the world. For if there is love, there is a desire to understand as well as a desire to remain in harmony with it. Rather, the question that now remains to be answered is; Why seek reconciliation with the world and why desire this harmony with the world?
5. For Arendt, equality is a political concept. At some level, men are all equal. If this notion is lost, natural, unchangeable differences that cannot be changed come to the fore and serve as dividing factors. In order for there to be just treatment of individuals and social groups in their own right, this notion must not be lost since they are beyond the power of man. This challenge was identified in today's political world where the

meaning of equality is being wrongly attributed. Likewise, this issue will be addressed when there is true concern for the world.

6. Likewise, Arendt comments that the “modern loss of respect, or rather the conviction that respect is due only where we admire or esteem, constitutes a clear symptom of the increasing depersonalisation of public and social life” (HC 243). A loss of respect would in turn imply less concern for the world and consequently, less good done in it, by and for society.

The question of the nature of evil is one of interest to Arendt from very early on. It became a major concern with the evolvment of radical evil and later moreso with her use of the phrase *banality of evil*.

1. It was shown that the alteration of the human condition resulted in what Arendt termed to be radical evil, which for her, is an evil that is beyond all known or categorised evil. In this sense, her understanding of radical evil was outside of its moral content and its ontological quality. On the other hand, the *banality of evil* is no consequence of modern social politics but a result of altering of the human condition.
2. For Arendt, philosophical truth concerns the individual in his singularity, thereby classifying it as ‘unpolitical’ (BPF 246). This is because, for it to be political, the human condition of plurality is necessary. On the other hand, factual truth and events concern men in their plurality, therefore, they are political in nature.
3. Basing on the counterreaction produced by her report on the Eichmann trial, Arendt’s effort to try to understand people’s reaction to it and her use of the phrase *banality of evil* revealed

the importance that Arendt held for the value of truth. She adhered to the factual truths she had reported in the Eichmann trial and she refused to change them even at the cost of the loss of friendships, fame and name. Here, her love and defense for factual truth are evident. Whatever her reasoning or whichever theories she came up with, were based on factual truth and on experiences and she adhered to these no matter what. And why did she do so? The answer that she herself often gave was the fact that truth has its own compelling force that is not debatable and can hardly be questioned.

4. In her quest to understand the negative and even hostile reactions, and also basing on what she had observed about Eichmann's 'thoughtlessness', Arendt was able to relate evil to thoughtlessness.
5. One may argue that Arendt's explanations and writings after *Eichmann in Jerusalem* were her effort to try to justify her use of the term banality of evil. If this were the case, then there would have been no change in her idea about the existence of radical evil. Rather, she would have stuck to her opinion, defending it in every possible way, which she did not. Instead, after trying to understand evil so as to understand the world, in order to be reconciled to it, she ended up by 'changing her mind' saying, that radical evil cannot exist and that only radical good can exist. Consequently, I have no reservations in concluding that her understanding and reflection on the banality of evil gave rise to her change of mind about the existence of radical evil.

Finally, there was the prime question that had to be answered and forms the theme of this thesis. Why is it only good that can be radical and what

does she mean by this? She tried to understand radical evil, previously not comprehensible by any previously known human standards for moral judgements (EU 309), by applying her own. There are a number of other conclusions drawn, in relation to this.

1. All the while that Arendt studied radical evil, the concept of the good was ever predominant as it is near impossible to understand the nature of evil without understanding the nature of good. She inevitably brings up the concept of good practically throughout her work as has been made evident. Arendt was in the habit of making binary oppositions so this must have been her most enduring one.
2. The philosophical interrogation of Hannah Arendt's last outstanding concept of *radical good*, led to an understanding of what "good" experiences she considered to be radical and how she justified this characterisation. Above all, it was found that it is the good that is inevitably at the centre of her political theories even from the very beginning in her study on the concept of love in Augustine.
3. Towards the end of Arendt's life, she changes her mind regarding the existence of radical evil. She previously holds that radical evil exists and then changes this completely saying that radical evil does not and cannot exist. Rather, she is of the view that evil can be extreme but not radical due to its lack of depth and that it is 'thought defying' because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots. However, the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because *there is nothing*. If evil has no roots, neither can it be radical.

4. Rather, evil can only be extreme. Extreme is not absolute. Complete absence of evil would mean non-existence. This is in line with Arendt's appreciation for the need for essence and existence to coincide.
5. Jaspers says that Arendt with Kant, agrees that, 'Man cannot be a devil' (AJC 525). To be a devil implies complete absence of good. Consequently, it is possible to conclude that for Arendt, all men have some good otherwise they would be non-existent. Which in turn would imply that his existence depends on the good that is in him.
6. If there is no good there is nothing, if there is nothing for the mind to work with, no root of any sort, then there is no reference or way in which one can think about it. This is what puts it in a category that is beyond comprehension making it incomprehensible – because it defies thought.
7. Ontologically, evil is a non-reality that depends on the good. If there is no good, neither is existence possible.

There were other interesting conclusions that were drawn. These are not directly related to the questions that were raised to help guide the research. Some of them are laid out below:

1. The relevance of the presence of a neighbour is vital in order to be able to love. One cannot forgive oneself in the same way that promises cannot be made to oneself. Forgiving and honouring promises are demonstrations of concern for one another. Both are risky actions and are based on the good will of the persons concerned making them free individual acts but that cannot be

carried out in isolation. They require the presence of others. Therefore, the acts of forgiving and promising are political in nature since they require the presence of others.

2. Forgiving and promising are not necessarily religious concepts (HC 238) but are relevant in the political arena. This is because they serve as a corrective remedy for action. Arendt held that natality, the capacity to begin something new, was the one thing which men had that could have been used to stand against the totalitarian rule. Because of natality, men can remain free agents in the sense that they are able to release themselves from the unpredictability of action as well as its boundlessness. She says this consistently in her work. Therefore, men can avoid or change the course of evil, even extreme evil because of natality.
3. Moderating political action or changing its course is a true political challenge and yet this is precisely what constitutes authentic political action. The greatness of politics is in doing politics or in its performance. Today's politicians face the challenge of exercising power without abusing freedom.
4. For Arendt, "freedom as a demonstrable fact and politics coincide" (BPF 149). This is why internal freedom, which remains without outward manifestation, is by definition politically irrelevant (BPF 146). This is the concept of actuality and is tied to Arendt's performance of the act wherein lies its importance.
5. Arendt identifies life as the highest good (HC 319). Therefore, in order to preserve and attain this good, one has to be able to begin a new action. The sheer capacity to begin, which animates and

inspires all human activities, is the hidden source of production of all great and beautiful things (TOT 468; LMW 217). From this theory of Arendt, I conclude that man, despite all odds, is able to do good because he is free.

6. It is possible to argue that Arendt continues to be relevant because of man's natural tendency to the good as well as the centrality of good in human existence. Her emphasis on action and therefore her effort to remain within tactile reach with worldly affairs is especially commendable because it is a realistic and practical outlook, widely applicable in today's philosophical world. This may explain the recent *Arendtian revival*.
7. Arendt further explains that since these remedies "function only under the condition of plurality, it is very dangerous to use this faculty in any but the realm of human affairs" (HC 238). In her opinion, men have tried to transfer this remedy of attempting to undo what has been done, by taking it outside of the human realm and applying it to the natural realm as is done in modern natural science and technology. When one tackles with the natural realm, one is interfering with necessary conditions given to man to *be* man. In the natural realm, "no remedy can be found to undo what has been done" (HC 238) except by means of destruction. What Arendt says, therefore is that, destruction in the natural realm eventually leads to self-destruction. What she also implies, is that the unforgivable is actually forgivable but only in the human realm.
8. If the intention is bad, then the outcome could not be good. This last point could be backed up basing on an unpublished essay entitled *The Eggs speak up*, which was marked "Circa 1950" (EU

270). There Arendt writes, “Each good action, even for a ‘bad cause’ adds some real goodness to the world; each bad action even for the most beautiful of all ideals makes our common world a little worse.” (EU 281) In other words, actions affect the world according to their nature. Bad actions will affect it negatively and good actions will have a positive effect. Therefore, good actions result in a better world.

9. Arendt warned that, “the problem of evil will be the fundamental question of post-war intellectual life in Europe—as death became the fundamental problem after the last war” (EU 134). This indeed has turned out to be true.

All in all, through this work, the study objectives proposed at the very beginning were realised and also surpassed. First, I was able to analyse Arendt’s phenomenological and existential philosophical formation and to provide a historical course of development of her principal ideas that were relevant to this topic. Second, was that it was possible to study and show the universality of her ethical-political thought in relation (and in contrast) to those of other relevant philosophers who had dealt with the afore mentioned concepts. Third, I identified and described the dialectic between good and evil as the source of Arendt’s political thought. This inquiry into the metaphysical conditions enabled a better understanding of her point of departure with regard to her understanding of the concepts of good and evil. Fourth, it was possible to carry out a philosophical interrogation of Hannah Arendt’s concept of the *banality of evil* and what she meant by it when she used it in her report on Eichmann. As exposed above, I was able to confirm that the banality of evil is no consequence of modern social politics but a result of the attempt to alter the human condition by making man superfluous and eliminating plurality and natality. Fifth, it was possible to carry out a

philosophical interrogation of Hannah Arendt's concept of radical good. It was possible to identify what "good" experiences she considered to be radical and how she justified this characterisation. Last but not least, it was possible to demonstrate the centrality of good in human existence according to Hannah Arendt. All these objectives provided a better understanding of her anthropology and offered an explanation for the *Arendtian revival* over the last decades that is also responsible for the renewed interest in her political theory.



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