CHAPTER 2

A Way of Thought

Critical Dismantling

Arendt approached politics through a kind of phenomenology: "I am a sort of phenomenologist, but, ach, not in Hegel's way – or Husserl's."[1] She learned phenomenology from Heidegger, whose way of thought was grounded in his view of human existence. This "existential" phenomenology aimed at a "critical dismantling" ("*Kritische Abbau*") of concepts inherited from the philosophical tradition. Heidegger wrote that critical dismantling consisted of three tasks: *Destruktion*, *Reduktion*, and *Konstruktion*: "These three basic components of phenomenological method – reduction, construction, destruction – belong together in their content and must receive grounding in their mutual pertinence."[2] If we follow *the way* Arendt thought, and if we unpack her few comments on *how* to think, it is clear that she worked through these three tasks in her attempt to construct a pure concept of the political.

Destruktion names the attempt to lay out the inherited terms in which we think of something, and to trace the genealogy of those terms back to the native sphere and the original experiences from which they were born. Heidegger described *Destruktion* as "a critical process in which traditional concepts, which at first must necessarily be employed, are de-constructed down to the sources from which they were drawn."[3] His *Destruktion* of the concepts of form and matter, for example, aimed to uncover their original sense by tracing the words back to their source in the experience of production and the sphere of equipment. In his essay on *The Origin of the Work of Art*, he argued that the concepts of "matter and form are

[1] Arendt, quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 405.
[2] Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 23. I am indebted to Rodolphe Gasché's lucid discussion of Heidegger's early method of phenomenology in "Abbau, *Destruktion*, Deconstruction," in *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
[3] Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 23.

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determinations of beings which find their true home in the essential nature of equipment," and that these concepts are bound to mislead our thinking if we abstract them from their native sphere and force them onto works of art.[4] To critically dismantle traditional concepts does not mean to trash them. It means to recover their original sense, to locate their native sphere, and to demarcate the limits within which they make sense and beyond which they tend to misguide our thought. *Destruktion* does not destroy tradition, but renews it by retrieving the original sense of inherited concepts. "And this is not a negation of the tradition or a condemnation of it as worthless; quite the reverse, it signifies precisely a positive appropriation of the tradition."[5] *Destruktion* shows the lineage of traditional concepts in order to clarify their sense and to deprive them of their seeming self-evidence.

Arendt made this task of thought her own. She argued that philosophical concepts are always formulated in words abstracted from a particular sphere of experience, and their abstract meanings always retain traces of their original sense. "All philosophical terms are metaphors, frozen analogies, as it were, whose true meaning discloses itself when we dissolve the term into the original context, which must have been vividly in the mind of the first philosopher to use it."[6] She described her work as a form of "conceptual analysis" whose first aim was to find out "where concepts come from."[7] Her first step is typically to lay out the common concepts we take for granted, to trace their lineage back to the native sphere from which they came, to uncover the experiences on which they were based, and so to illuminate their original sense. Her task as a thinker was:

> to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distill from them anew their original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the very key words of political language – such as freedom and justice, authority and reason, responsibility and virtue, power and glory – leaving behind empty shells with which to settle almost all accounts, regardless of their underlying phenomenal reality.[8]

This genealogy of concepts can have two outcomes. It can reveal that some of the words in which we think about politics first originated in nonpolitical experiences and were later abstracted from their native sphere and transposed into political thought; the effect is to deprive these words of

[4] Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track,* ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10.
[5] Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 23. [6] LMT, 104.
[7] Arendt, quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 318. [8] BPF, 15.

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their self-evidence and to raise questions about whether they limit or mislead our thinking. But a *Destruktion* of traditional concepts can also reveal the specific political experiences that originally gave inherited words their meaning; the effect is to illuminate more clearly the original sense of words.

Reduktion is the attempt to understand a single, prime example of a phenomenon by describing how it appears in experience, and then to move from that particular experience toward a general understanding of the phenomenon's essential traits. Heidegger described it as the move from descriptions of specific beings toward an understanding of their Being: "For us phenomenological reduction means leading phenomenological vision back from the apprehension of a being, whatever may be the character of that apprehension, to the understanding of the Being of this being."[9] In this sense, to "reduce" a work of art is to move from a description of a particular work of art as it actually appears in experience towards a reflection on the nature of artworks in general. This is why Heidegger began his reflections on art with a description of an actual work – van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes – on whose basis he constructed a general concept of art. *Reduktion* follows from the basic imperative of phenomenology: thought has to start with concrete examples and orient itself by the way they appear in experience. The effort to grasp what beings are in essence must begin from an ever-renewed "return to the things themselves."

Arendt followed this movement in her work. While she rarely highlighted the experiences that informed her thought, she believed that to understand what beings are in essence we must always start from and be guided by the way concrete examples appear in actual experience. In *Between Past and Future* she wrote:

> These are exercises in political thought as it arises out of the actuality of political incidents (though such incidents are mentioned only occasionally), and my assumption is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings.[10]

This movement of thought can have two starting points. On the one hand, it can start from the direct, personal experience of the thinker. This was often Arendt's point of departure: her work on totalitarianism started from her experience of Nazism; her thoughts on the banality of evil came from

[9] Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 21. [10] BPF, 60.1014.

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her being at the trial of Adolf Eichmann; her reflections on thinking, willing, and judging were guided by her own experience of the life of the mind. But when personal experience is limited or impossible, on the other hand, thinking can start from the testimony of those who have experienced a phenomenon first hand. Arendt worked this way as well: her thoughts on revolution were guided by the testimonies of the American revolutionaries; her concepts of power and violence were informed by the news of the Hungarian Revolution; her reflections on the political started with the experience of politics expressed in the nontheoretical writings of classical Athens.

Konstruktion is the attempt to interpret or construe what something is in essence, by sensing the limits of traditional concepts, discerning what resists or eludes them, and rethinking these concepts in order to more fully grasp and bring to light what they have distorted or concealed. Heidegger described *Konstruktion* in typically cryptic terms: "Being does not become accessible like a being. We do not simply find it in front of us. As is to be shown, it must always be brought to view in a free projection. This projecting of the antecedently given being upon its Being and the structures of its Being we call phenomenological construction."[11] It is easier to see what *Konstruktion* is if we look at what Heidegger actually did in his own thinking. In his essay on art, for example, he first points out two traits of artworks that elude the concepts of form and matter – the power of artworks to illuminate the world, and their irreducible resistance to final understanding. He then tries to bring to light and grasp these two traits by refining and redefining the words "world" and "earth." The task of *Konstruktion* has to start from the meanings of words in everyday speech, since everyday language may hold prejudices that misguide our thinking, but it may also contain insights that are deeper and more illuminating than traditional concepts: "All ontological inquiries into phenomena ... must start from what everyday *Dasein* 'says' about them."[12]

Arendt's thinking was also *konstruktiv* in this sense. She aimed to locate the limits that inherited concepts impose on our thinking, to show what those concepts have been unable to grasp, and to refine or redefine the terms in which we think in order to more fully comprehend what has been beyond the reach of conceptual thought. In her view, political theory has

[11] Heidegger, *Basic Problems in Phenomenology*, 21–22.
[12] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans, Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 259.

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been led astray by basic concepts of political philosophy; but it has also been led astray by the metaphysical assumptions that have guided the way essential questions have been traditionally framed and understood. The problem is "not that the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men on earth have become 'meaningless,' but that the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility."[13] Her aim was not just to critique political philosophy, but to critically dismantle the metaphysical concepts that political philosophers have used to frame their questions:

> I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today.[14]

She insisted that critical dismantling is not simply negative: "the dismantling process itself is not destructive."[15] Her thinking was *konstruktiv* – it aimed to reinterpret political phenomena by reconstructing inherited concepts.

Theory and Nontheory

Arendt's way of thought exceeds common concepts of theory. The word "theorist" comes from the Greek word for "spectator," she noted, and "theory" has traditionally implied the stance of an outside observer: "From the Greek word for spectators, *theatai,* the later philosophical term 'theory' was derived, and the word 'theoretical' until a few hundred years ago meant 'contemplating,' looking upon something from the outside, from a position implying a view that is hidden from those who take part in the spectacle and actualize it."[16] To theorize is to disengage from active involvement with beings in order to see them from a detached and outside perspective. As theory in this sense is a privileged form of knowledge, theoretical language is a privileged form of discourse. Just as the task of the theorist is to withdraw from active engagement with phenomena in order to see them as they appear in the experience of disinterested contemplation, so the task of theoretical discourse is to abstract words from the prejudices and confusions of traditional language, and to invent a terminology in which each term has a precise and definite sense.

Heidegger challenged this view of theory in *Being and Time*. Things do not always appear most clearly when we suspend our active involvement with them, he said. Think of a piece of chalk at a blackboard. When I use

[13] RJ, 162. [14] LMT, 212. [15] LMT, 212. [16] LMT, 93.

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it, I see clearly how it relates to the context of the classroom, and these contextual relations are precisely what make it a tool. If I stop using it and adopt a theoretical stance to the chalk, seeing it from outside the activity of writing, I can learn to see and describe it as a chemical substance with objective properties. But this theoretical perspective and discourse necessarily overlook the relational context that is essential to the piece of chalk as a tool of writing. Heidegger asked: "Why does what we are talking about ... show itself differently when our way of talking is modified? Not because we are keeping our distance from handling, nor because we are only looking *away* from the useful character of this being, but because we are looking *at* the thing at hand encountered in a 'new' way, as something objectively present."[17] This kind of theoretical stance does *not* give us a privileged view of the chalk. Instead, it changes the way the chalk appears, so that we see it not as a tool that is ready-to-hand but as a substance that is objectively present. This kind of theory lets us see the chalk *as a natural substance* (calcium carbonate), but it blinds us to the relational context essential the piece of chalk *as a tool*.

Theory does not have to distort our view of the Being of beings, for Heidegger: "A modification of our understanding of Being seems not to be necessarily constitutive for the genesis of the theoretical mode of behavior 'towards things.'"[18] We can avoid such distortion by adopting a different kind of theory. Instead of abstaining from active involvement with things in order to see how they appear in the experience of detached and disinterested contemplation, we can suspend our active involvement with things in order to reflect through memory on how they appeared *in the experience of active involvement*. This kind of theory is exemplified by *Being and Time* itself. Heidegger theorized the nature of tools not by abstracting them from the experience of work and focusing on their objective properties, but by reflecting on the contextual relations that make tools what they are, and that are most apparent in the experience of engaged and interested practical activity. He started from nontheoretical insights, and translated those insights into theoretical terms.

This kind of theory is central to existential phenomenology. A basic trait of human existence is self-understanding. Our self-understanding guides the way we live. Ways of life center on distinctive forms of practice, in light of which the world is relevant and meaningful to us in distinctive ways. To comprehend a way of life we cannot adopt the stance of an observer who sees that way of life from the outside, as if it were a natural reality existing

[17] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 344. [18] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 344.

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in and of itself. Instead, we have to start by understanding ways of life from within, by entering the self-understanding of its practitioners, and by explicating, clarifying, and refining their understanding of the world.

This approach to theory alters the relation of theoretical and nontheoretical discourse. Nontheoretical discourse is not just a crude or primitive form of language, rife with prejudice and confusion, from which one must cobble together a precise and definite theoretical terminology. Instead, nontheoretical discourse may articulate genuine insights reached through nontheoretical forms of thought. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger drew on the insights of philosophers, of course, but also on the insights of nontheoretical thinkers such as Thucydides, Augustine, Luther, and Tolstoy. A Latin myth about Care, for example, was cited as a nontheoretical interpretation of human existence: "in this document human existence expresses itself about itself 'primordially,' unaffected by any theoretical interpretation and without aiming to propose any."[19] One task of theory is to find genuine insights in nontheoretical discourse, and to translate those insights into the conceptually articulate language of theory.

Arendt took from Heidegger this existential approach to theory. But she saw in it something Heidegger did not see: its implications for political philosophy. In *The Human Condition*, she argued that political philosophers have generally not understood politics from within, on the basis of an active engagement in political life, but have seen the active life from the outside perspective of the contemplative life.

> I had been 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.[20]

Existential phenomenology opened up a new approach to political theory: rather than withdrawing from political life and adopting the outside perspective of a spectator in order to see politics as a reality existing in and of itself, the political theorist should suspend active engagement with politics, or study the first-hand testimonies of political actors, in order to reflect on the meaning of political phenomena as they appeared in the experience of active engagement. Instead of viewing politics as an objective reality independent of human understanding, theorists should see politics as a possibility of human existence that depends on a certain

[19] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 190. [20] LMT, 6.

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self-understanding, a self-understanding implicit in the nontheoretical language and literature of political communities.

For Arendt, politics cannot be understood as if it were a natural phenomenon. Theorists have to start not by looking for timeless, universal, and objective traits of politics, but by explicating, clarifying, and refining the self-understanding of people living political lives: "The sources talk, and what they reveal is the self-understanding as well as the self-interpretation of people who act and who believe they know what they are doing."[21] In her view, this "self-understanding and self-interpretation are the very foundation of all analysis and understanding."[22] Just as Heidegger argued that "All ontological inquiries into phenomena ... must start from what everyday *Dasein* 'says' about them,"[23] so Arendt argued that thinking must start from the sense of words in everyday speech:

> Popular language, as it expresses preliminary understanding, thus starts the process of true understanding. Its discovery must always remain the content of true understanding, if it is not to lose itself in the clouds of mere speculation–a danger always present.[24]

Arendt knew that everyday speech usually expresses an average understanding of things, and one task of thought is to discern and to point out what resists or eludes popular language. But everyday speech can also articulate nontheoretical insights that are more illuminating than inherited theoretical concepts. In this case, the task of thought is to explicate the insights implicit in nontheoretical language, and to refine or redefine inherited words in order to distill those insights into adequate concepts.

Arendt's approach to theory is clearest in her book *On Revolution*. Her thoughts on revolution started from the words of actual revolutionaries. Instead of focusing on their theories, she focused on their nontheoretical discourse. Her task as a theorist was not to recover or critique the theories of the revolutionaries, but to locate the authentic insights implicit in their nontheoretical discourse, and to "translate" these insights "into the less direct but more articulate language of political thought."[25]

Arendt took the same approach to the question of the political. She was concerned with the political theories of philosophers, of course, but she also aimed to find the authentic insights implicit in the nontheoretical writings of Greek poets, orators, and historians. In an essay on freedom,

[21] EU, 338. [22] EU, 339. [23] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 259. [24] EU, 312.
[25] OR, 174.

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for example, she tried to retrieve an authentic understanding of freedom articulated in the texts of classical antiquity – not in the theories of philosophers ("this articulation is nowhere more difficult to grasp than in the writings of the philosophers"), but in the nontheoretical discourse of "political and pre-philosophical traditions."[26] One task of political theory, in her view, is,

> To try to distill, as it were, adequate concepts from the body of non-philosophical literature, from poetic, dramatic, historical, and political writings, whose articulation lifts experiences into a realm of splendor which is not the realm of conceptual thought.[27]

Arendt also stressed that true insight may be implicit in language itself. Another task of theory is to retrieve and refine the nontheoretical understanding of political phenomena implicit in the language of politics.

Tasks of Thought

So Arendt's approach to political theory consisted of six tasks:

Destruktion
(1) To lay out the terms in which political matters are understood.
(2) To trace them back to the experiences from which they emerged.

Reduktion
(3) To describe an example given in experience or first-hand testimony.
(4) To move from this description to a reflection on what it is in essence.

Konstruktion
(5) To find the limits of concepts by showing what they obscure.
(6) To rethink these concepts in order to better grasp what things are.

These are tasks in a way of thought, not steps in a rigid procedure. Arendt never slogged through them step by step. But when she thought through questions of political theory, explicitly or implicitly she worked through each of these tasks. Her way of thought is especially clear in her effort to critically dismantle traditional concepts of "rule."[28]

[26] BPF, 165. [27] BPF, 165.
[28] See especially "Ruling and Being Ruled," in *Thinking without a Bannister*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 56–68.

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(1) The first task of *Destruktion* is to lay out the basic terms in which we think. Arendt argued that we tend to think of politics in terms of "rule" (*archein* or *kratein*), and to conceive of forms of government as forms of rule (monarchy, democracy). The language of political philosophy has been shaped by "the commonplace notion already to be found in Plato and Aristotle that every political community consists of those who rule and those who are ruled (on which assumption in turn are based the current definitions of forms of government – rule by one or monarchy, rule by few or oligarchy, rule by many or democracy)."[29] These terms have led theorists to think of politics as a matter of sovereignty, command, and domination – vertical power relations of control and obedience.

(2) The second task of *Destruktion* is to trace terms back to their native sphere. In the case of "rule," Arendt argued, etymology suggests that words for rule did not originate in the political sphere but in the sphere of the household. "All Greek and Latin words which express some rulership over others, such as *rex*, *pater*, *anax*, *basileus*, refer originally to household relationships and were names the slaves gave to their masters."[30] We have come to think of politics in terms of rule in part because the words that express power over others have been abstracted from their native sphere, transposed into the political sphere, and applied indifferently to the realities of politics.

(3) The first task of *Reduktion* is to describe a prime example of a phenomenon. Arendt argued the classical polis was the prime example of a political community, and that if we want to understand the essence of politics it helps to understand the experiences and language of the polis: "The very word [politics] ... echoes the experiences of the community which first discovered the essence and the realm of the political. It is indeed difficult and even misleading to talk about politics and its innermost principles without drawing to some extent upon the experiences of Greek and Roman antiquity, and this for no other reason than that men have never, either before or after, thought so highly of political activity and bestowed so much dignity on its realm."[31] For this reason, much of her work focused on understanding the history, institutions, and language of the classical polis.

(4) The second task of *Reduktion,* in this case, is to move from the example of the polis to the essence of politics. Arendt's thinking started

[29] HC, 222. [30] HC, 32. [31] BPF, 154.

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from politics as it was understood in classical Athens and moved toward understanding the political as a universal possibility of human existence. One of the things that distinguished the Greek polis from other forms of community, she argued, was that it excluded relations of rule between male citizens:

> Since Herodotus, [freedom] was understood as a form of political organization in which the citizens lived together under conditions of no-rule, *without a division between rulers and ruled*. This notion of no-rule was expressed by the word *isonomy*, whose outstanding characteristic among the forms of government, as the ancients had enumerated them, was that *the notion of rule* (the 'archy' from ἄρχειν in monarchy and oligarchy, or the 'cracy' from κρατεῖν in democracy) *was entirely absent from it.* The *polis* was supposed to be an isonomy, not a democracy.[32]

From this attempt to grasp what distinguishes the polis from other kinds of community, Arendt tried to grasp the traits that distinguish politics from other ways of being together. One trait essential to politics, in her view, is that it excludes relations of rule among equals:

> The meaning of politics . . . is that men in their freedom can interact with one another without compulsion, force, and *rule* over one another, as equals among equals, commanding and obeying one another only in emergencies – that is, in times of war–but otherwise managing all their affairs by speaking with and persuading one another.[33]

This is the *reduktiv* movement of existential phenomenology: Arendt started with a prime example of a polity – the Athenian polis – and moved towards a concept of politics as such. This kind of theory is grounded in history, but looks to the essential. *Reduktion* starts from the singular but aims at the universal.

(5) The first task of *Konstruktion* is to locate the limits of traditional concepts by showing what they distort or conceal. Arendt argued that the notion of rule has obscured the nature of political power, and has led theorists to confuse power, strength, force, authority, and violence. Underlying this confusion was

> the conviction that the most crucial political issue is, and always has been, the question of Who rules Whom? Power, strength, force, authority, violence – these are [thought to be] but words to indicate the means

[32] OR, 30 (italics added). [33] PP, 117 (italics added).

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> by which man rules over man; they are held to be synonyms because they have the same function. It is only after one ceases to reduce public affairs to the business of dominion that the original data in the realm of human affairs will appear, or, rather, reappear, in their authentic diversity.[34]

The notion of rule has led theorists to conceive of power in terms of vertical relations of command and obedience. But this concept of power has its limits, Arendt argued. If we conceive of power in terms of rule, we cannot grasp what happens in revolutionary situations when a ruler loses popular support and the command/obedience relation collapses. Revolutionary situations elude traditional concepts of power. The task of *Konstruktion* is thus to point to what exceeds the scope of inherited concepts. In this way, she marked the limits of traditional concepts of power by pointing out their failure to grasp and illuminate the phenomenon of revolution.

(6) The second task of *Konstruktion* is to refine inherited concepts in order to better grasp what things are. In her thoughts on violence, Arendt tried to unearth a level of power that precedes and makes possible the power to rule. The power to rule (the vertical structure of command and obedience) depends on the ability of a group to act in concert through their common support of a ruler. This ability is the condition of possibility of the power of the ruler. So the power of a ruler ultimately depends on the power of a group to act in concert. "Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group stays together."[35] When a group can no longer act in concert, or when it stops supporting the ruler, the power of the ruler to command obedience is bound to collapse. Traditional concepts of power focus on rule but obscure its conditions of possibility.

Traditional concepts obscure another kind of power as well. If power at the most basic level is the ability of a group to act in concert, then power can be generated not only by vertical promises of allegiance between rulers and supporters; it can also be generated by horizontal promises of mutual commitment among equals. So traditional concepts of power also obscure the possibility of non-hierarchical power structures.

[34] OV, 44. [35] OR, 44.

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In short, Arendt aimed to free political thought from the limitations imposed on it by traditional concepts of rule. She used a threefold method of *Destruktion*, *Reduktion*, and *Konstruktion* to uncover the condition of possibility of power in the sense of rule, and also to bring to light the possibility of a kind of power that exceeds altogether the vertical structure of command and obedience. The aim of her thought was to clarify, sharpen, and refine the sense of words in order to better grasp what political phenomena are in essence.

How then did Arendt use this way of thinking to work through the question of the political? Let us follow her path of thought one task at a time.

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